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UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

NAOMI JACOB
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THE BELOVED PHYSICIAN
THE MAN WHO FOUND HIMSELF
"SEEN UNKNOWN . . ."
THAT WILD LIE
THE PLOUGH
ROOTS
PROPS
POOR STRAWS
GROPING
FOUR GENERATIONS
THE LOADED STICK
"HONOUR COME BACK"
THE FOUNDER OF THE HOUSE
BARREN METAL
TIMEPIECE
FADE OUT
THE LENIENT GOD
NO EASY WAY
STRAWS IN AMBER
THIS PORCELAIN CLAY
THEY LEFT THE LAND
SALLY SCARTH
THE CAP OF YOUTH

One-Act Plays :

THE DAWN
MARY OF DELIGHT

Autobiography and Biography :

ME: A CHRONICLE ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE
"OUR MARIE" (MARIE LLOYD)
ME AGAIN
ME IN WARTIME

General :

ME IN THE KITCHEN

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

by
NAOMI JACOB

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To

LILIAN BRAITHWAITE

WITH GRATITUDE FOR HER LOVELY WORK, AND
ADMIRATION FOR HER GRAND WORK ON A
NEW STAGE—FOR THE DURATION ONLY
—THE HOSPITAL SECTION OF E.N.S.A.,

from Mickie.



CHAPTER I

ELIZABETH

AMOS SWAN gathered his papers together, slipped them into his neat leather case and sighed heavily. This interview with Elizabeth Forest marked, he felt, the closing of a chapter in his life. A month ago he had attended the funeral of his old friend James Forest; dead at sixty-five of acute congestion of the lungs. Young Dr. Thirk might call the disease pneumonia if he wished, his father Simon—t'ould doctor—stuck to the old, and more familiar name. Amos remembered speaking to Simon Thirk one morning in the Square, when James Forest lay in.

"I saw Wilfred last night," he said. "He tells me poor James is down with pneumonia. Now what exactly is that, Simon?"

Simon Thirk, who looked more like a farmer than a doctor, had scratched his chin.

"Pneumonia!" he repeated. "Why, Amos, no more an' no less than acute congestion and inflammation o' the lungs. It's a nasty tricky complaint, as likely to go one way as t'other. We must hope for the best, but sixty-five is sixty-five."

James had succumbed. He'd put up a good fight; he had sent for Amos Swan, and panted out the question, "All's right and in order, Amos?"

"All's right and in order, James."

"My wife is a remarkable woman." The statement had seemed inconsequent at such a time, and Amos had found nothing to say, except, "Yes, indeed."

"She'll do what's right," Forest said, "to the bairns—to the business—and"—there was a long pause—"to me." Again the lawyer agreed, "Yes, indeed."

Forest closed his eyes, his weakness was pitiful. James who had carried his years so lightly, it had seemed impossible that he was twenty years older than his wife. Now the dark hair looked damp and thin, the face always so meticulously shaved, except for the neat side-whiskers, drawn, old and showing a thick stubble of beard; the strong white hands fumbled uncertainly with the hem of the linen sheet.

Swan thought, "Poor James, he's in a bad way."

Forest's eyes opened, he moved his head on the pillow. "Good bairns, Amos," he said, "but Fred needs watching. He's—he's—light minded. Goo'-bye, Amos."

"Good-bye, James, God bless you."

They knew one another too well to pretend. James was dying, he knew it, and knew, too, that Amos knew it.

He died early the next morning, and five days later Amos Swan had attended the funeral. A magnificent funeral, as befitted a man who had been a Town Councillor and a Justice of the Peace. The account in the *Callingly Gazette* had made impressive reading. James Forest, who had begun life as a pupil teacher in a Church School in the West Riding, who had later taken over his father's old posting inn the Royal Lion, at Callingly, and died possessing no fewer than five other hotels, had been followed to the grave by the bearers of the finest names in the district.

Amos Swan stood at his desk, repeating those names slowly and with grave appreciation.

"Charles Edward Piers Hallet, fifth Earl of Swathford, Sir Gervase Vane of Coombe Vane, Sir Thomas Illing of Illing Manor, The Hon. Francis Mellor of Callard Cavendish, Mr. Hebor Blattly of Hilton——"

Good names, grand names,—and after them Aldermen, Councillors, Justices of the Peace, doctors, lawyers and important tradesmen, farmers, land agents, representatives from breweries, from political associations, Oddfellows, Freemasons, Rechabites—the list seemed endless.

A dignified funeral, without needless display. What had the Earl said to him?

"Ah, Swan, sad day for Callingly! Everything very well done. Nothing of the Circus Element about it."

Sir Gervase Vane, laying his hand for a moment on Fredrick Forest's arm, had said—stammering as he always did—it was that stammer which had kept him out of Parliament: "G-great example, y'-father. S-something t-to l-live up to, eh? Y-yes, y-yes."

A month ago. Now he was going to hear what James' widow had decided. The will had been simple and explicit. Amos thought, "I saw to that." Everything was left to "My beloved wife, Elizabeth." She had full authority to do as she thought best. If she wished, the Royal Lion at Callingly, the Lamb and Wheatsheaf at Dunford, the Blue Anchor at Weston, the

Grand at Forchester and Blew Moor could come into the market to-morrow.

In his heart that was what Amos Swan believed Elizabeth Forest would do. Sell the lot, and retire from public life to some comfortable country house. After all, hotel keeping was no job for a woman. Fredrick had charm, looks, and a kind of—Swan sought for a phrase—spurious cleverness; but he lacked stability: not even marriage and fatherhood had really stabilised Fredrick. Eleanor would marry, she was pretty and had her Aunt Gertrude's money; Percy was clever, there was a career as an accountant waiting for him; Martin—well, Martin was only twelve and still at the Grammer School. Far better sell the properties and look forward to a life of tranquillity and ease.

Swan picked up his bag. The Town Hall clock was striking eleven. He mustn't keep Elizabeth waiting. He called to Venner, his clerk, that he was going to see Mrs. Forest at the Royal Lion, and stepped out into the Market Square.

The Royal Lion—with its wide porch supported by four black pillars faced him, two of the pillars bore large convex brass plates, the name of the hotel which was engraved upon them almost obliterated by years of cleaning. Above, on the flat roof of the porch, stood the famous Royal Lion, an immense white plaster beast, its head surmounted by a brightly gilded crown.

The story went that the Young Pretender, for what reason or at what specific date history did not state, had spent a night at the Lion, and insisted that it should be crowned and given the host's brandy. He had mounted the roof of the porch, saluted the lion, and declared that it should be crowned and given the prefix—Royal.

James Forest, in recounting the story to visitors, never failed to insist, "You will, of course, notice that the ornament is no crown; but the coronet of a baron."

Swan crossed the market place nodding, half absently, to those who greeted him, not stopping to speak with anyone until outside the Royal Lion a man stood directly in his path.

"Mr. Swan, sir, could you spare me a moment?"

Swan frowned. "It will only have to be a moment, Willet," he said. "I've an appointment."

The tall, pasty-faced man dressed with such meticulous neatness, nodded. "Yes, yes. As you know, Mr. Swan, I've left Sir Gervase Vane. Butler there for twenty years. I'd a mind to make a change, sir. Since Mr. Forest has left us I wondered if the Blue Anchor might come into the market."

"Ah, you've a fancy to set up as a publican, eh?"

"Well yes, sir. I'm prepared to pay a fair price." Swan nodded. "I'm on my way to discuss matters with Mrs. Forest now. I'll let you know her decision." Willet pursed his lips, then said, "I did hear that——" The lawyer answered impatiently, "Tut, tut. Believe all you hear and you'll eat all you see! I'll let you know."

He entered the dim panelled hall of the Royal Lion. For a moment his eyes rested with pleasure on the dark old wood, noted the glint of the shining brass, the carefully polished glass; the whole effect was that of a place on which care was lavished. He turned to the window which opened on to the office where Miss Armitage sat at her books and ledgers.

Mary Armitage was more than book-keeper and reception clerk, she was in charge and control of the small and unbelievably select Smoke Room. The Royal Lion boasted a variety of bars, each with its own definite social position.

Down the long flagged yard leading to the stables were the Vaults, where drink might be consumed "on or off the premises." The Vaults carried no social distinction; like the Four Ale bar it was frequented by the working men of Callingly, and presided over by barmen. James Forest had been uncompromising concerning the management of his bars. Twice a day he had visited them all, praised or blamed, listened to complaints or given advice. Big Bill Mason at the Vaults and Charlie Clewes at the Four Ale, both chosen for their strength and integrity, had their orders.

"The bar is the working man's club," Forest told them. "I manage those clubs on behalf of the members, and it is not my intention to have the quiet of those members disturbed by ill-conditioned fellows who don't know how to behave. Men come here to drink and converse, not to get drunk and argue. The working man, aye, and his betters," Forest had said, "must learn the use, not the abuse, of alcohol." "Fire and water," was another of his axioms, "good servants but bad masters—I add a third—strong drink!"

In the hotel itself were other bars; the Saloon Bar, with its comfortable seats and marble-topped tables, presided over by either Miss Movaley or Miss O'Brien; the General Smoke Room, much frequented by the less important of Callingly's tradesmen, where Thomas and Edward took the orders, allowing greater freedom of speech than would have been possible before females. The Billiards Room, with its two fine tables, relied on Harry, the

marker, to order the drinks through a sliding hatch which led to the Saloon Bar.

The Small Smoke Room had pride of place over all the other public rooms; indeed the Small Smoke Room was not, by tacit agreement, open to the public. Strangers entering and giving their order to Miss Armitage were met with a polite but definite rebuke.

"I think, sir, you want the Saloon Bar or the Smoke Room."

"Isn't this a public room?"

"Well, sir, it is, and it isn't." Ringing the small brass bell on the counter, she would order Thomas or Edward to "show this gentleman the Saloon Bar, if you please."

In the Small Smoke Room gathered the influential citizens of Callingly. There every evening could be found Amos Swan, Dr. Ben Harrison, Joseph Benfold, Dr. Thirk and others. So zealously was admittance to the Bar guarded that it was said when one evening young Dr. Wilfred Thirk entered his father was the first to expostulate, saying, "Nay, Wilf, this will never do!" Dr. Wilfred, it was recorded to his credit, had answered very properly, "Sorry, Father, I wasn't thinking. Good-night, gentlemen."

As the presiding goddess of this Holy of Holies Miss Mary Armitage was flawless. She was past her first youth, yet still agreeable to the eye, being cast in a Junoesque mould. Her character was admirable, her morals faultless. No one ever dreamed of calling her by her Christian name, and once, when Alderman Baines, returning from a visit to Leeds, had raised his glass and sung in a pleasing baritone:

"Kind, kind and gentle is she,
Kind is my Mary——"

Miss Armitage had said, politely but coldly: "Mr. Forest doesn't care for singing in the Smoke Room, Alderman Baines."

This morning Amos Swan stopped for a moment to speak to this paragon.

"Good-morning, Miss Armitage, Mrs. Forest is expecting me?"

"Good-morning, Mr. Swan. Yes, indeed, she is in Cavendish."

"Ah, I'll go up then." He hesitated then added, "This is a momentous day for the Royal Lion."

* If he had expected to glean information from her he was disappointed. She merely nodded, and said: "Yes, indeed, Mr. Swan."

He mounted the wide, low stairs with the broad polished hand-

rail, and walked along the corridor past the rooms whose doors all bore names. There was Illing, Callar, Hilton, Coombe Vane, and, at the end of the corridor, Cavendish.

He knocked, and a woman's voice bade him enter. It was a handsome room, with a wide window overlooking the Market Place. The walls were covered with a green paper to within a height of three feet from the floor, when a narrow band of wood formed a border for a dado of embossed paper painted to resemble bronze. The mantelpiece was of white marble with ornamentations of sparkling granite, the fender and fire-irons were of brass polished until they shone like gold. The furniture was a magnificent suite comprising two easy and six small chairs upholstered in patterned velvet.

A woman rose from the smaller of the arm-chairs as Amos Swan entered. She was of middle height, inclined to stoutness, with a fresh complexion and very bright, intelligent blue eyes. She was dressed in heavy mourning, generously trimmed with crêpe, and finished at the neck and wrists with cambric collar and cuffs. She held out a small, rather plump hand.

"Ah, Amos, I was expecting you."

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting. Forgive me, Elizabeth."

"It's good of you to come to me. I know how busy you are."

"My dear, apart from my affection for you, you're an important client," he smiled.

"You've come to hear my decision?" She threw back her head as if she defied him to question her right to take what steps she chose. "Well, here it is; the Royal Lion and the rest will remain as they are. Mine in trust for my children."

He showed his surprise. It was incredible that Elizabeth should contemplate such a step. Running hotels was no business for women. True, with a husband to guide the concern, they might deal effectively with linen, the female staff and so forth, but to take entire control! He realised how certain he had been that Elizabeth would retire from the business.

"But have you considered the gravity of the step?" he asked. "Fred is young, Percy still almost a boy, Martin, a child."

Elizabeth smiled. "I am not proposing that Fred, or Percy or Martin should carry on the business. I shall." Seeing the dismay in his expression, she went on, speaking rapidly and with considerable animation. "My dear husband and I were married for twenty-five years, a quarter of a century. He discussed everything with me, even, sometimes, took my advice. I have a very excellent staff here, Mary Armitage is a tower of strength.

James, and no man was a better judge of character, chose admirable managers for the other hotels. Mr. Preston at Blew Moor, William Moss at the Blue Anchor, my own cousin Herbert Crowther at Forchester—splendid men. Even Mr. Calvert at the Lamb is as honest as the day, though perhaps not quite so energetic as the others.

"Besides, Amos"—she paused, and continued to speak in a more confidential tone—"I, and only I, really know my dear husband's aims and ambitions. James believed in the potentialities for good in the hotel business. He had no interest in these huge, gilded places with their inflated prices. He held that a shilling should purchase at least 10s. worth of value. The hotel-keeper must give value for money, and sufficient to allow himself a reasonable profit. He visualised a chain of moderately sized hotels through England, the best possible food, the best attention and service, comfort and simple dignity, but no 'catch penny' rubbish. That was his phrase. 'My dinner will taste no better,' he used to say, 'because the door's opened for me by ten small boys dressed in sky blue who'd be better off learning a trade.' Oh!"—with a sudden break in her voice—"my dear dear James, how I miss him!" She dabbed her eyes with her tiny black-bordered handkerchief, then said, "Forgive me, Amos."

"My dear Elizabeth!" he protested. "It is only natural, only right that you should feel as you do. You must do as you think best, but remember nothing is irrevocable, nothing."

She sat very upright in her chair, her eyes still misty with tears, her lips very firm.

"Once I put my hand to the plough I shall not turn back, Amos. I shall continue, as well as I can, the work which my beloved husband began. I feel sure that I can look to you, dear friend, for help and counsel."

He was deeply moved. He had known her when, twenty-five years ago, James Forest had brought her as a bride to Callingly. He had thought that twenty-one years was too great a difference in their ages, and had wondered whether James' gravity and serious outlook might not weigh heavily on a young woman. Elizabeth had adapted herself. The daughter of a well-to-do corn chandler, she had learnt something of business methods. Since her mother had been an invalid for more than ten years, Elizabeth had managed her father's house entirely and admirably. Her father had died ten months before Elizabeth married James Forest, and the business had passed to his eldest son, John William Merton.

It seemed incredible that twenty-five years had passed since James Forest said, "Amos—this is my wife," and the short, sturdy young woman with the smooth brown hair had offered him her hand, saying, "This is a great pleasure, Mr. Swan. Mr. Forest has spoken of you so highly and so often."

He had always liked her, always admired her devotion to James and to her children. He had liked her courage when Aubrey, her fourth child, had died in 1879, followed in less than three weeks by the baby, Mary. She had learnt control, perhaps from James, who though a devoted father, had been able to say firmly, "The Lord hath given and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the Lord."

Now she was preparing to shoulder the responsibility of James Forest's business, talking about it as though she had her instructions from James.

"I know his wishes, his ideas, his ambitions. Never," quickly, "unworthy ambitions. Again and again he told me that his one aim was to do his duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call him. My husband was a remarkable man, Amos, a man of ideals, a real Christian. I am deeply blessed to have been his wife and the mother of his children."

Amos cleared his throat, her sincerity affected him. "Quite—oh, quite," he said. "James was a fine man."

As he spoke the door opened, and a young man entered. He was dressed in deep mourning but his obvious high spirits, his fair hair and fresh complexion seemed to rob his clothes of any air of melancholy. His blue eyes danced, his full red lips were parted in a smile as he greeted the lawyer.

"Ah, Mr. Swan! You've heard my mother's decision?"

"I have, Fred. She's taking a momentous step."

"Yes, indeed," Fred Forest agreed. "It's going to mean a lot of hard work, added responsibilities. Only this morning Grace said to me, bless her, 'I hope all this responsibility won't age you!' Dear thing, she is!"

Elizabeth glanced at her eldest son sharply. Amos wondered why he had never realised the strength of her chin until that moment.

"Responsibilities, Fredrick?" she said.

"Why, Mama, it's pretty obvious that they must. For example, the licence here will have to be transferred to me, I shall have to live on the premises, I shall——"

Elizabeth held up a plump white hand. "My dear, I shall hold the licence, I have seen the Clerk to the Justices this morning.

Oh, it may not be usual, but this is an exceptional case. There is no need for you and Grace to leave your home."

"But who will run the business, Mama?" His surprise had given place to indignation.

"I shall; acting on your dear papa's instructions," she said calmly.

"And what shall I do?"

"Act on mine. Amos, I must not detain you. A glass of sherry? Yes? Fredrick, order sherry for Mr. Swan, if you please."

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH

ELIZABETH Forest called "Come in," without raising her eyes from the accounts which she was checking. Her lips moved as she made her calculations for she was not naturally quick at figures, though necessity had made her accurate.

The door opened and Mary Armitage entered bearing a tray with cups, and a tea pot. Still with her eyes on her work Elizabeth said, "Ah, Miss Armitage, tea. How pleasant!" Then more softly, "And nine is twenty-six, and five makes thirty-one, one pound eleven. I shall only be a moment; seven and eight, fifteen, and twelve twenty-seven, and eight are thirty-five, and eleven forty-six. There!"

She closed the account book, wiped her pen on a small piece of red felt, and rising came over to the fireplace.

"I must get Eleanor to make me another pen-wiper," she said. "It will be a change from embroidering fine handkerchiefs for Mr. Benfold." Her voice implied a certain satisfaction that her daughter was in a position to embroider handkerchiefs for Mr. Benfold.

Miss Armitage, busy with the tea things, said, "Yes indeed," rather vaguely, she added, almost sharply, "You're tired, Mrs. Forest. Imagine it! Nearly half past eleven and still working at the books."

Elizabeth smiled, "Oh, I can stand a lot of hard work. And what about you, early and late you're working."

Mary Armitage brought her a cup of tea, black, strong, and sweet as she liked it; then drawing up one of the smaller chairs sat down. Though James Forest had been dead for five years neither of the two women would have used the comfortable arm-

chair which had been his. "What I do and what you do, Mrs. Forest, are two very different things. You're the mistress, I'm your servant."

"You're my very dear and good friend," Elizabeth returned. "Good gracious, what should I do without you! I dare not think."

"None of us are indispensable," Mary Armitage said primly.

"As indispensable as makes no matter. Yes, thank you, I'll take another cup." She sighed contentedly. "I do enjoy my tea, last thing, and I can do with it. It's been a hard day. This Jubilee may mean additional takings, but it means additional paying out. I told Mr. Moss at the Anchor this morning, 'Jubilee or no Jubilee, I'm not repainting *this* year. A good wash down must suffice.' Quite huffy he was too. I must say I was pleasantly surprised at John Calvert. I've never thought him very—well—on the spot, as you know, but his window boxes at the Lamb will be a sight, and no mistake. Cornflowers, scarlet geraniums and white dog-daisies. I said," she chuckled, "'Very nice, Mr. Calvert, but what's the bill going to be?' He said, 'If you'll allow this to be my small token of patriotic affection to Her Majesty, I shall be happy.' Very nice, I felt, touching."

Miss Armitage nodded. "Very proper, yes."

"I shall see that it is heard of in the right quarters," Elizabeth said. "I shall mention it to Mr. Mellor; as Lord of the Manor at Dunford he will appreciate it."

In five years Elizabeth Forest had developed. She had grown certain of herself and her capabilities. Before her husband's death she knew herself to be an efficient housekeeper, sufficiently intelligent to grasp his plans, and understand his methods. When she decided to continue the business after his death she had been beset with fears and almost overcome by doubts as to her ability to make a success of the venture. She had spoken to no one of those fears and doubts, she had gone about her work quietly; watching and noting. She forgot nothing, she overlooked nothing. She set herself to learn the difficult and intricate business of hotel-keeping, asking no help, confiding her problems to no one. Her cousin, Herbert Crowther, who managed the Grand at Forchester, said, after a certain brief and stormy interview, "S'truth, Elizabeth's got the eye of an hawk! She's about as merciless as one, and all!"

Her managers looked forward to her weekly visits with a kind of expectant apprehension, a mixture of hope and fear.

Each Tuesday she visited The King's Head at Blew Moor, driving on to the Lamb and Wheatsheaf at Dunford, calling at the Blue Anchor on her way home through Dunford. Every Wednesday she took the 10.15 train to Forchester, where she lunched, to drive afterwards to the latest of her properties, the Bay Mare at Hilton. At twenty minutes past four she left for Callingly.

She never spared herself, she continued to observe with almost religious care all the rules which James Forest had made. When she paid her first visit to the Vaults and the big Four Ale Bar, Bill Mason had gaped with astonishment, and Charlie Clewes had made it plain that he considered her visit an intrusion, while Harry Allop, the cellarman, had been openly indignant when she told him that she intended to keep the stock book.

He was a gaunt, elderly man who stated, "Nay, Ah know varry little aboot wines, but fur reit know-ledge o' beer an' speerits theers not ma equal i' Three Ridings, choose how!"

Elizabeth had noted Mason's astonished dismay, the sulky expression on Clewes' big scarlet face, and the barely concealed indignation of Harry Allop; Hemer, the boots, had adopted a slightly patronising tone, "Dean't fash thee sen ower much, Mum," he said. "Ah've given satisfaction ter t' measter fur above seven years, Ah reckon Ah can satisfy thee."

She sent for them all, and interviewed them as she sat at her desk in Cavendish.

They stood before her a group of heavy-faced, elderly men, their hearts filled with resentment, yet tinged with admiration for this short, stout, middle-aged woman. "Now!" She flung the word at them like a challenge. "We must understand one another. Mason, Clewes, why that attitude when I visited the Vaults and the Four Ale this morning?"

Mason grinned sheepishly, Clewes scowled.

"Well," sharply, "speak up."

Clewes said, "Why, we baith bin 'ere a longish time, an' it dean't seem quite the ting fur a laady ter be entering pooblic bars, maybe 'earing a lot o' rough talk."

"Rough talk hurts no one," Elizabeth said. "If you mean *dirty* talk, no one has any right to hear that anywhere. If you and Mason hear it, it's your duty to put a stop to it."

Mason said, "T'measter niver 'ad no fault ter find wi waay t'Bar was run, missus."

"And I don't intend that I shall have any reason to find

fault," she returned smartly. "You have all been here some years, you're well treated, well paid—do you want to stay?"

Harry Allop cleared his throat noisily, and took a step forward. Elizabeth said, "Yes, Allop——?"

"T' cellar allus bin my business," he said. "No one's never 'ad call ter grummle at t' staate o' my ale nor porter. Ah'm one as can tap a barril on t' 'ottist daay i' Summer wi'oot smuthering t' plaace i' liquor. Ma ingines is allus clean as new six-pences. Is that trew, Bill, is that trew, Chuck?"

They answered in unison. "Nowt truer, 'Arry."

"Ah've broken dahn speerits fur Ah dunno 'ow many years, allus ter t' satisfaction o' measter an' customers, an'——" making an impressive pause, "Customs an' Excise 'ave niver fhand nowt wrong."

Elizabeth listened intently, she knew that these men were honest, that they were trustworthy, but she knew, too, that the presence of James Forest at the Royal Lion was one thing, the presence of his widow, another. She knew nothing of tapping and stooping, of cleaning pipes and keeping beer engines in order. She had seen a waste trough in the bars but she had no knowledge as to what became of that "waste." She had tried to study something of wines from an old book which she had found on the bookshelf in her husband's office. These men all possessed practical knowledge, and that she could obtain from them. To ask for it was to admit her ignorance, and to make it possible for them to adopt an attitude of superiority. If she could gain all the information by observation, by using her intelligence and listening to the comments of Charles, Bill and Harry, she could assume a knowledge and grasp which she did not possess.

Hemer was less difficult. He engaged and paid the outside porters, the "Barrows" hired by commercial travellers were his private venture. Already she knew the prices charged for the various stock rooms, knew too, many of the more important travellers. A word now and again to Hemer, criticizing the cleaning of boots and shōes, the neatness of the board announcing when guests wished to be called, would be sufficient to keep him in his place. Charles, Bill, and Allop remained as the men who were to be her teachers; teachers who must never realise that they had Elizabeth Forest for a pupil.

She sat facing them, a woman of no great attraction beyond that of obvious health, her round face slightly flushed, her head held very high.

"I intend," she said, "to visit the bars, both the Vaults and the Public, when I wish. If it is my desire to serve a customer myself I shall do so. There must be no question of what is, or is not a woman's job. I am proprietor of this hotel and as such I am a law unto myself. Only the Excise Officers and the Licensing Justices have a right to question anything I do. With regard to the cellar, both the wine and beer cellars, Allop, you may be in charge, but I am in control. Incidentally, those straw cases must not be left lying about." She had read in James' book that straw was injurious to wine; it might be true or not, it sounded knowledgeable. "Also I suspect that Number Three shows traces of damp." Allop, staring hard said, "Why it allus 'as, missus." "I'll send for Mr. Hardcastle. He must arrange for a damp course or something of the kind. Now—are you all staying or going?" she ended abruptly.

They exchanged glances, and Hemer said, "Nay, Ah'm glad enoof ter staay."

"Ah reckon as Ah am, an' all," Allop agreed.

Charlie Clewes, wagging his head, mumbled, "Ah reckon Ah'm ower old ter mak' a change."

Elizabeth smiled. "You'll have to accept those I make, Clewes."

"That's unnerstood, missis."

"And you, Mason?"

"Why, aye, Ah deant see me' sen leavin' t'Royal Lion."

"Then!" She brought her hand down on the arm of the chair, "That's settled. Remember the Royal Lion may have a mistress, she is also the master. Good-morning to you all."

Only when she was alone did she realise the strain which the interview had imposed upon her. She had never had to deal with the men, self-assertion was foreign to her. The maids, the kitchen staff had been tractable enough, but she had never imagined that she could impose her will and her wishes on four men, two of whom were older than she was.

Her hands were shaking, her lips tremulous. She rose, and dabbing her eyes walked to the mantelpiece, over which hung a portrait of James Forest. It had been presented to her by the Mayor and Corporation after his death. The artist had copied a photograph, taken during Forest's term of office as Mayor. Resplendent in scarlet robe trimmed with sable, the magnificent Mayoral chain painted in faithful, not to to say slavish, detail, James Forest stared out at the world. To the critical the portrait

might seem wooden and lifeless, to Elizabeth it was the image of the man she had loved and admired; she saw it with her heart and memory, not only with the physical eye.

That was the James she had adored for more than twenty years, there were the features she had loved. Those calm, wise eyes, that broad forehead, with the carefully brushed hair above, that firm mouth and chin, the strong masterful nose—these things were James.

Clasping her hands, she looked up at the portrait, saying softly, "Oh, James, my dear husband, be my guide always. Help me to be wise."

It did not strike her that every evening when, wearing a very long nightgown, trimmed at the neck and sleeves with embroidery and fastened at the neck with a large linen button, she petitioned the Almighty in almost exactly the same phrases—

"Be Thou my guide and my helper."

There had been other difficulties to face. Fredrick had assumed that with his father's death he would share the management with his mother. Elizabeth made it clear that divided authority could only lead to disaster. "Control must be vested in one person, and one person only, Fredrick."

"Then what is my position?" he had demanded, his handsome face suddenly sulky.

Elizabeth said gently, "That surely depends on yourself, my dear. Prove your worth, your ability, and I shall be the first to recognise both."

"But how? That's what I want to know."

"Let us see" She spoke kindly, unconscious that she used a tone which she might have used to a child who wished to be helpful. "There are the orders from the Vaults and the other bars, they are sent to the office every Tuesday. They need checking. The supervision of the stock rooms. It struck me that Number Five needs re-papering. There are always a hundred things which need seeing to; window catches, door handles and locks, washers for taps, and so forth."

He listened, scowling. "The idea being that I go round with a notebook every day, and make enquiries about taps—and if the lavatories are working well, eh?"

"My dear Fredrick—*please!*"

"That's what it amounts to. Why can't I manage one of the hotels?"

"Because you do not know sufficient of hotel management."

"How am I going to learn?"

"By doing what I have suggested."

He dug his hands deep into the pockets of his well-cut trousers. "Can't you see that it gives me no definite position? I'm nothing. A kind of understrapper. If I did what you suggest, if I sent for Collins, chose new paper and paint for Number Five, I should have to submit the estimate to you."

"Certainly," calmly.

"You see, I should have no authority."

"One must earn the right to have authority."

He flung out of the room, angry and humiliated. He had boasted to Grace, his pretty wife, that he would be the real head of the business. She had listened, wide-eyed, and marvelled at his cleverness.

"It's wonderful," she said, "You're so clever, Freddie, you'd make a success of anything. Oh, I do admire you, darling!" Now he was offered a job which meant nothing, which carried no real weight, responsibility or authority. "Damn it," he thought, "I shouldn't dare to order a penn'orth of tin-tacks without permission! It's—it's—a damn shame!"

He had shown so little interest, had been so irregular and spasmodic about the tasks allotted to him that Elizabeth had been at her wit's end. At twenty-eight, the father of three children, the husband of a pretty wife, he was irresponsible. He had spasms of energy, anything new made an instant appeal to him, an appeal which lost its strength as soon as the novelty wore away. He was the best-looking of all her children. Eleanor, who had married Joseph Benfold in 1893, had a fine figure, but though her face was pleasant enough and her character admirable, she possessed no physical attraction. Elizabeth had been vaguely disturbed at Eleanor's marriage. True, Benfold was wealthy; a man of essential decency and integrity, but he was fifty and Eleanor was twenty-two.

"Eleanor, my dear," Elizabeth had said, "do you, do you love Mr. Benfold?"

Eleanor had replied rather primly, "I have a great respect and affection for him, Mama." Recalling her own whole-hearted love for James Forest, Elizabeth said half regretfully, "And that satisfies you, Eleanor?"

"Why, yes, Mama. We have a great many interests in common. Joseph is very kind."

The marriage seemed to be a success, though Elizabeth never accustomed herself to the difference in their ages. True, James had been twenty years older than herself, but James had never

looked his age; Benfold looked ten years older than his. He looked old, he sounded old, he was old.

Fredrick had said, "Old Joe Benfold—he must look horrible in bed!"

She had rebuked him for his vulgarity; but she knew that the same thought had flashed through her own mind. Still, Eleanor presented no problems, neither did Percy, who at twenty-three was preparing to sit for his final examination as an accountant. Percy, like his sister, was plain. His figure was heavy, his complexion florid. He was a silent fellow, taking little or no interest in anything except his work, but he was entirely satisfactory.

Martin, so like his father that there were times when his mother, watching him, knew that her heart contracted. He was seventeen, and was going to Oxford in a month's time. He had won the "Illing Scholarship," and though this would have to be supplemented, he would to a great extent be self-supporting. Not that there was any lack of money, but it would have never occurred to Elizabeth to send any of her sons to a University unless they had won a scholarship. She came of tradesman stock, she never wished to ape the manners or customs of the gentry, and Universities, like Public Schools, were for them, and not for the grandchildren of a corn chandler and a publican. Martin had earned his right to go to Oxford; that right did not come to him automatically through his birth or position in the social scale.

She had discussed the financial aspect of his University career with him. His demands had been modest, he had no inflated ideas and she had promised him a larger allowance than that for which he had asked.

He had smiled, and it struck her that Martin's smile was singularly sweet.

"That's awfully generous of you, Mama."

"I want you to do us credit, Martin. I want you all to be people of whom your dear father would be proud."

"Yes"—his eyes had turned to the portrait above the mantelpiece; "his standards were very high, weren't they?"

"He always said," Elizabeth spoke softly, "that a man's aim must exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?"

Martin nodded. "What indeed?" Then suddenly, "Mama, would you mind if I told you that I want to enter the Church?"

Startled, she met his steady eyes. "You mean that you want to be a clergyman, Martin?"

"I am—almost—certain that I do, Mama. I think it would make me very happy. If you are very happy yourself it does give you power to make other people happy, I think. I have conviction, the only question is—have I a vocation? That's what I must find out." He smiled again. "No good being a poor soldier, better remain a good civilian, eh?"

"Vocation," she said doubtfully. It seemed a queer word to use; had he said "ability" she would have understood him better. "A soldier," that was all right. The Prayer Book said, "Let us pray for the Church Militant"—the Fighting Church. "Vocation," she repeated, "that sounds a little, well—High Church, Martin."

This time he laughed, throwing back his head, showing his white, even teeth, in a moment he ceased to be a rather grave young man, and slipped back to being a boy.

Elizabeth said, "It's not a laughing matter, my dear."

"Isn't it?" he was still smiling broadly. "Well, if the Church demands that I leave my sense of humour outside its doors—I shall have to stay outside too. Don't worry, Mama, I may find that I'm not in the least acceptable."

II

She sat sipping her tea, enjoying the slight bitterness which not even two lumps of sugar could kill. Of course neither she or Miss Armitage had any right to be drinking tea at twenty minutes to twelve. Dr. Thirk had said that she was preparing the ground for acute indigestion and a leathery skin.

"Then what am I to drink when my work for the day is finished?" she demanded.

"Hot milk."

"Now that *does* give me indigestion!"

"Whisky and hot water then."

"Ugh! I detest whisky. No, no, I shall stick to my tea. Miss Armitage and I enjoy it."

He grumbled, "I hope you and Miss Armitage 'ul enjoy tannin-lined stomachs then."

Nothing would ever cure Dr. Thirk of his rather embarrassing outspokenness. Miss Armitage had agreed, he was kindness itself, he was clever, but there were times when he almost went beyond the bounds of what was "quite nice."

There was the time when Rose Harris, one of the housemaids, had been so poorly; she had been bilious and Elizabeth had

given her large and generous doses of Epsom Salts. Rose had not improved under the treatment, and had confessed at last that she fancied she might have a tumour.

Despite her protests, Elizabeth had sent for Dr. Thirk, and when he had seen poor Rose, she had questioned him.

"Do you think it is a tumour, poor girl?"

Thirk had slapped his knees and shouted with laughing.

"Tumour!" he bawled. "Aye, the kind that i' five months 'ul be lying i' her arms! Nay, Elizabeth Forest, you're nobbut a bairn fur all yer years."

Not the most refined way to make such an announcement, and yet you could not help both liking and trusting the old doctor.

"I'm dull to-night," she admitted to Mary Armitage.

"You're tired, Mrs. Forest."

They were great friends, even close friends, yet they had always been, and always would be, "Miss Armitage" and "Mrs. Forest" to one another.

"Perhaps, and a little worried," Elizabeth admitted. "Ah!" Miss Armitage said with sympathetic understanding, "Mr. Fredrick?"

"I'm afraid so."

Miss Armitage sat stiffly upright, her eyes hard, her expression one of intense disapproval.

"I don't like to mention it, it may be that he has your approval and permission, but he came into the Small Smoke Room this evening with Mr. Harold Wrench and Mr. George Small."

Elizabeth set down her tea cup with a clatter. "No!" she ejaculated. Miss Armitage bowed her elaborately dressed head.

"Indeed—yes, Mrs. Forest."

"Who was there at the time?" Elizabeth's tone was that of one who feels impelled to know the worst.

"Mr. Swan, Dr. Harrison, Dr. Thirk and Mr. Francis Mellor."

"Mr. Mellor——"

"The Honorable Francis Mellor, Mrs. Forest; he was in conversation with Mr. Swan."

"What happened?"

Miss Armitage sighed. "They came in, Mr. Fredrick asked what they would take. Mr. Small said"—she gave a little shudder—"Got any decent brandy in this pub of yours, Fred?"

"Miss Armitage, it isn't possible."

"Indeed it is, Mrs. Forest."

"Go on, please—and then——?"

"They all had brandies and sodas, large brandies. They were laughing and talking, and they mentioned a name——"

"Whose name?"

"Mrs. Matt Walker, of the Grange. Their remarks were—well, not too well chosen, and the Honourable Francis looked up, gave them a very hard stare. Dr. Thirk heard, too, and walked over to Mr. Mellor. He said, 'Well, Mr. Mellor, sir—who tackles this? You, me, or Dr. Harrison?' Mr. Mellor said, 'Leave it to me, Thirk, if you please,' and came over to them."

"Oh dear, oh dear," Elizabeth moaned softly.

"He spoke very calmly with great dignity."

"Mr. Mellor would!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"He said—so far as memory serves me, 'I don't know since when this Smoke Room has been turned into a scandal shop, but this is the first time I have ever heard a lady's name mentioned here without due respect. Now, either remove yourselves or we, myself and these other gentlemen, will engage a private room where we can be free of the annoyance of your presence.' Dr. Thirk rapped on a table and said, 'Hear, hear!' Dr. Harrison—after all he is Mr. Fredrick's father-in-law—looked very uncomfortable indeed, Mr. Swan said, 'Quite right, Mr. Mellor!'"

"Did none of the—young men say anything?"

"Mr. George Small said, 'Really, sir, it's a public room.' But Mr. Wrench and Mr. Fredrick walked out, and he followed them. None of the gentlemen made any comment."

Again Mrs. Forest said, "Oh dear, oh dear," then added, "There are the moments when I long so for the help of my dear husband."

"It could never have happened in Mr. Forest's lifetime," Miss Armitage said.

As if the words had conveyed a rebuke, Elizabeth sprang to her feet, her eyes flashed, her whole body was firm with resolve.

"And believe me, it shall not happen again in mine!"

CHAPTER III

ELIZABETH

ELIZABETH interviewed Fredrick the following morning. To say that she "had a talk with him," even a "serious talk," would be to underestimate the gravity of the meeting. She sat at her desk, for she was coming to feel that to occupy that rather formal

chair, with an expanse of desk before her, gave her added dignity and importance. In all probability she never realised this as a concrete thought, it was an impression which had formed itself in her mind, remaining there vague and unexpressed.

He came in, as always carefully dressed, beautifully shaved, his hair meticulously brushed, exuding a faint odour of expensive Eau de Cologne. There was a shining quality about Fredrick—his boots shone, his linen seemed to possess a greater polish than that of other men, his carefully tied tie, dark in tone, held the gleam of rich silk rather than any definite colour. His manner was easy, and slightly contemptuous; he had a trick of standing with one hand in his pocket, while the other played with the gold watch-chain, which to Elizabeth's unspoken regret, had replaced the heavy "cable" which his father had always worn. To her eyes that thin gold chain seemed poor and meaningless, apart from the fact that the one which had belonged to James Forest automatically became endowed with a rare and particular value.

He said, "Miss Armitage said that you wanted me, Mama."

"I do, Fredrick, and—on a very grave matter."

"Really!" He raised his well-marked eyebrows, then shrugged his fine shoulders. "Another fault, I suppose—well?"

Very patiently she answered, "My dear boy, why will you always assume the worst, why do you always meet me with an air of antagonism? You make our—our little discussions so difficult."

"I make nothing difficult," he replied. "The difficulties come from you. I wish you'd tell me what the new fault is, I've got to see Millar about the retileing of the loose boxes. Oh"—very quickly—"of course I shall decide nothing without consulting you as to price, Mama!"

"Fredrick! How can you be so unkind?"

Impatiently he said, "Unkind! How is that unkind? It's what you insist upon, isn't it? Do—get on, Mama!"

Elizabeth sighed. How difficult he was. How unlike Percy or Martin. Percy who, without argument, without discussion, without any hint of self-assertion had taken over the books and accounts of all the Forest hotels. He had told her what he proposed to do—an hotel every day. "Which will give me time, Mama, to submit a full statement to you at the end of every week." Every morning he came into Cavendish, bade her "Good-morning," kissed her affectionately, then said, "I'm just off to Blew Moor" or Dunford or whatever the place might be. She had given him a small room as his office. He had furnished

it very simply, only stipulating that he must have a roll-topped desk with a good lock. "We don't want all and sundry able to open it and see how rich you're growing," Percy said, and laughed. Martin wrote to her, long and amusing letters; kept within his allowance, and asked for so little that she felt she longed to shower gifts upon him. Fredrick had an allowance of five hundred a year, and in a moment of expansion Elizabeth had admitted to Mary Armitage that he didn't earn a fifth of it. Fredrick was always in debt. His tailor's bill, the decorator's bill, bills for his wife's clothes, for the children's clothes—she was always paying something for Fredrick. Not that she grudged the children anything, they were dear little things, and pretty as pictures—James, Gladys and Francis, all fair-haired and blue-eyed.

"You must cut your coat according to your cloth," she told Fredrick once.

He—with her cheque safe in his waistcoat pocket—had laughed, "It's the cloth that's so confoundedly expensive, Mama."

His words, "Do get on, Mama!" stung her. She stiffened, and rapped with her fingers on the desk.

"Fredrick, I will not be spoken to so! I have a right to respect and respect I will have. This matter of the Small Smoke Room——"

"Oh, the Holy of Holies—well, what about it?"

"Kindly refrain from blasphemy! You know and always have known that the Small Smoke Room is reserved for the elder gentlemen of the town. It is not a fit place for young men like yourself, Harold Wrench or George Small. Whether either of these young men are fit companions for you is another question. You are twenty-eight and ought—I say ought—to be able to choose your own friends."

He said, lightly, "One of the few things I'm allowed to do, it appears. Well—concerning the Small Smoke Room. There is no notice up to prohibit the entrance of anyone except the town's old fogies. It's a public room—exactly as the other Smoke Room, or the Billiards Room are. If it's a club, let us know the rules. The terms of membership. Must one be sixty-five and well covered with the moss of ages before one is eligible for membership?"

"You are being very foolish and very impertinent!"

"I'm merely asking for information, Mama."

"You know as well as I do that there is a kind of unwritten rule that the room is reserved for elderly and highly-respected gentlemen. That is as much a—a tradition as the coronet on the

head of the lion over the porch. You might say that men *qualify* for the right to use that smoke room."

"And what," still speaking with the same air of impertinent lightness, "are those qualifications?"

Elizabeth lost her temper and sprang to her feet.

"One of them is that you shall not stand there talking gossip about any woman. Decent men don't bandy women's names about in public places, and you should know that."

"Decent men don't listen to other men's conversations," he flung back at her.

"They cannot avoid doing so. You don't suppose that a gentleman like Mr. Mellor wishes to overhear scandal concerning Mrs. Matt Walker, do you?"

He yawned. "I've not the slightest idea what old Mellor wishes," he said. "Anyway Mama, don't worry—as Harold Wrench said, the wretched place is like a morgue, all those old fogies are dead and don't know it. Once was quite enough for us, we shan't go in there again. Depressing hole."

Her courage and anger began to evaporate, she knew that her hands were shaking, that her throat contracted and her eyes smarted with unshed tears, she turned away and made pretence of busying herself with papers on her desk.

"Is that all you have to say to me, Mama?"

"Yes," her voice shook, "that is all."

Fredrick stood watching her. He hated to see a woman cry; however she might have irritated him her tears always upset him. Women were so pathetic, he felt, when they set out to fight men. They went to pieces. They might stay the course for a time, but almost inevitably they broke down. He went over to his mother and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Now don't upset yourself, Mama—it's all so silly. Just because I went into a particularly dull, stuffy little room with two of my friends—how preposterous! What a mountain out of a mole-hill!"

She dabbed her eyes. "No, Fredrick—it's not only that. It's the fact that you don't—don't recognise the fitness of things. It's the fact that—that Mr. Mellor should have felt it his duty to reprove you. It's so humiliating for me. When I remember how your father's entrance into that room was welcomed by everyone. How they listened to him, respected him, admired him. How even the Earl and Sir Gervase enjoyed a talk with him. You make me very unhappy, Fredrick—more unhappy than I can tell you."

"I'm sorry, Mama, really sorry. It's just unfortunate that I'm—unsatisfactory. I don't show up well against Percy and Martin. You see, I want things, they don't. I don't want to be your glorified errand boy. Whenever I speak to any of the tradesmen about fodder, repairs, painting—what you will—they all say the same: "Then you'll see what your mother says about it, will you, Mr. Fred, and let me know?" I can never do anything on my own. I'm twenty-eight, as you reminded me. I'm not a child. It may be that a few old fellows think me incapable, but my own generation doesn't. Wrench and Small—both able fellows—think very highly of my capabilities, I can assure you. Let me out of leading strings. If I have responsibilities, I shall stand up to them, be sure of that."

"If only I could be, Fredrick!"

"I tell you that you can be. A chance—that's what I want."

She drew herself very stiffly upright. "Very well, you shall have it. I've been offered the Ring of Bells, in the Old Market Place. If I take that for you, to go in there in three months' time, will you set to work to learn, well—to learn all there is to learn?"

He smiled, his eyes shone, he looked handsomer than ever.

"Of course. That's a lovely old place. I could make something of it. As for learning," he laughed, "I'm not altogether ignorant, though you like to think that I am!"

His pleasure infected Elizabeth, she laid her hand on his arm, and came closer to him.

"I want you to make a success, my dear boy," she said. "I'm sure that you know a great deal, more than I imagine, but it's the little things which tell so heavily." Still smiling, she asked,

"How many glasses out of a bottle of whisky, Fredrick?"

"Glasses?" he repeated. "D'you mean how many of what people mean when they ask for a 'small whisky'?" She nodded. "Oh—I should say about thirty, eh?"

"Your first lesson," she said, "one that I have had to learn. In this hotel business you can't afford to have any 'abouts.' That may mean all the difference between profit and loss."

He still smiled. "Then let me go and begin my lessons this very minute."

II

The Jubilee was over, and Elizabeth was glad. There had been a great rush of business, some astonishing compliments—as when both Sir Gervase Vane and Sir Thomas Illing decided to give

banquets at the Royal Lion. The Freemasons had followed their lead, and she had seen the big ballroom filled with a huge table in the form of an E lacking the short middle arm, laid for over two hundred of the most respected gentlemen and tradesmen of the district. The Earl himself, Provincial Grand Master, had sent his compliments to her, and said that he had never eaten a finer or better-served dinner.

Sir Thomas had said in his stilted, precise voice, "Everything was admirably done, Mrs. Forest, I am more than satisfied, I am delighted, and, dare I say surprised? I did not know that the Royal Lion could rise to such heights."

Sir Gervase, who was younger, and it was said, given to being a little wild, met her in the hall and stopped her. Women liked Gervase Vane, he paid them compliments, he made them feel that they were of supreme interest to him.

He held out his hand, smiling and showing his big white teeth, and said, "Ah, don't try to hide—you must face us all with your honours thick upon you. Excellent, excellent, entirely excellent. You're busy—yes? Oh, you're not busy? That's good. You could spare me ten minutes, yes? Then ask my friend, Ferdy Blatty, and myself to come and take wine with you. Which means, allow us to beg you to take wine with us, you giving us the pleasure of using your own sitting-room for our talk."

Elizabeth, slightly apprehensive, fearing that despite his praise of the dinner there might have been some terrible mistake made, said nervously, "Of course, of course, Sir Gervase. My own sitting-room is Cavendish. I shall be delighted. Up this first short flight of stairs——"

"Yes, yes, but—the momentous question of what do we drink?"

Mr. Blatty said, "Been drinking some very good brandy——"

Elizabeth said, "Otard '63, I think."

Vane shook his head. "No, no. Brandy is no drink for a lady. It's the juice of the grape and can therefore be followed by more juice of the grape. Mrs. Forest—a delicate compliment to yourself. You have a good Clicquot? I was certain of it. Cold but not too cold." He laughed. "I am fortunate in having many good friends among the ladies, and I hold none in higher esteem than—The Widow."

Elizabeth had no idea what he meant, she saw no connection between a bottle of champagne and women who were friends of Sir Gervase Vane's, and what was this mysterious reference to a widow? Could he mean herself, was he perhaps a little—well, merry after the good brandy?

The two men followed her upstairs. In Cavendish Vane wandered round the room looking at the furniture, giving little exclamations of pleasure.

"Blattly—come here, if you please. How delightful! This sofa table, a charming piece, and this little writing desk. So different, Mrs. Forest, from that big modern monstrosity where I don't doubt you work, controlling the destinies of your hotels. There's a nice piece of Wedgewood—a graceful pattern. I hope that someone who appreciates it washes and dusts your china, for it is very, very good. Ah!" as the waiter entered, "the entrance of my friend, Widow Clicquot."

Then, Elizabeth thought, the reference to widows had something to do with the champagne.

Sir Gervase felt the bottle tenderly as it stood in the big silver plated bucket, nodded gravely, and said to the waiter, "Very good."

Only when they were all seated, when Mr. Blattly had asked if they might be permitted to smoke, did they come to the reason for their late visit.

"Mrs. Forest," Vane said, "you will realize that this visit is made in a spirit of warm friendship and admiration, not in one of carping criticism. We all admire you. The Earl said to me a few days ago that you had not only ability but pluck. We know how the rest of the Forest Hotels are run—splendidly. That is why we are going to criticise the only department which it is possible to criticise. Am I right, Ferdie?"

Mr. Blattly nodded. "Perfectly right, Gervase. Visit made in a friendly spirit, we hope received in the same spirit. Food, first-rate, if unimaginative. Who wants imagination at a tenants dinner, however important some of those tenants may be? Greatest good of the greatest number, eh? Service, right up to the mark. Glass, china, linen, a credit to you. Cigars, better than many of the smokers deserved—Ramon Allones, if my memory does not play tricks with me. Now for the—but! Go on, Gervase, please."

Vane held his glass, twirling it round slowly by the stem, staring at the moving golden fluid, his eyes half closed.

"Ah, yes—the But. There might be something amusing there, Ferdie. Wasn't a certain Royal Duke drowned in a butt of wine? However, one might say that this 'but' affects the 'butts' eh?" Elizabeth thought what rubbish these people talked—first widows and now jokes about dead dukes—they hadn't got the better of her there! She remembered that a

certain Duke of Clarence had been drowned in a butt of wine. Vane continued, "Yes, the wine, Mrs. Forest. You ought to specialise in wine. There is good wine to be had, outstanding wine, wine of character and interest. Why not make it known that your cellars hold wine which—well, worth travelling many miles to taste? This," pointing to the wine glass which he still held, "is good. You understand me—good. Our revered Widow never lets us down, if she is treated properly. But there are aristocrats among wines and spirits. Eighty years old Napoleon—forty years old cognac—age old ports—champagnes which are at the zenith of their beauty; there are curiosities too, strange wines, unusual wines, wines for the—shall we say—collector, as that piece of Wedgewood there is only fully appreciated by people of trained and educated taste. I commend the idea of specialising in wines to you, Mrs. Forest."

Blattly said, "'Pon my soul, you talk like a poet, old man."

Elizabeth listened, her face grave and very intent. She knew nothing of wine. These men realized that. She must be grateful for their suggestions, but never for a moment allow them to imagine that they were taking her out of her depth. Somehow, somewhere, from someone, she would gain the knowledge that was needed—and very soon. In five years she had learnt everything that she needed to know. She could handle a staff, she had already hinted to Mrs. Collins, the cook, that the time was rapidly approaching when the Royal Lion would need a chef. Mrs. Collins, sixty if she was a day, had begun to feel the work just a little too much. She would have her own kitchen, a smaller kitchen, and there she would continue to make the cakes for which the house was famous. Elizabeth had learnt strange things about Customs and Excise, about Government Permits and the meaning of the letters "O.P." and "U.P." She knew what she could return to the brewers and see that she was "allowed for," she knew the exact shade of difference between the dignified friendliness which she offered Amos Swan, and the dignified attention—without the friendliness—which she offered to the Earl. She could dictate to men servants and know that they never questioned her orders. Very well, she could and would stock her cellars—and very soon.

Elizabeth glanced from one to the other. Both fine figures of men, men of importance, of position, of family. They were here, in her sitting-room, drinking her wine—though they might have paid for it—stretching out their long legs over her carpet,

lounging in her chairs, spending their time on her behalf. It was evident that the Forest Hotels struck them as places worth visiting, places where, if the need arose, they could take their important, aristocratic friends without fear of bad meals and indifferent service. They had voiced a complaint, or at least pointed out to her how and where she might make improvements. It should be done. She knew these people, people who had land, money, position and taste. That was where their opinions were of value—they had taste. Again they were loyal. They were conservative in their habits as well as their politics; once a tailor, a bootmaker, a hatter—yes, an hotelkeeper pleased them, deferred to them, without becoming subservient, their interest in that person and that person's business became almost affectionate and certainly proprietary.

Sir Gervase lifted the bottle, and rising said, "Yes, Mrs. Forest, just another glass—half a glass. That's right. Ferdie? And——" he poured wine into his own after filling his friend's, saying, "And that's another 'dead man.' There's a paradox for you! The widow becomes a dead man. Might enlarge on that. Make it very amusing, eh? Now—to business. We're interested—very interested. Unusual for a lady to run an organisation like the Forest Hotels. To run it well is still more unusual. Now, no woman of your capabilities could be other than ambitious. You could never be content to stand still, to rest on your laurels. At the moment, I believe you have several hotels, and that you have just taken the Ring of Bells. Now—what of expansion? In these days, we live in days of expansion, the Empire sets us the example; I feel certain that you wish to follow that example."

He sat back, smiling and confident. He had always prided himself upon his ability to read human nature, and for some days ideas concerning the Forest Hotels had been filling his mind. He had communicated them to Ferdinand Blattly, to Thomas Illing, to the Earl himself. Their response to his suggestions had been characteristic.

The Earl said, "Well, Vane, there may be something in it, then again, there may not. I can't commit myself. What I will say is that I will listen to any proposals you may have to make to me on this matter at any time."

'It's that manner of his,' Vane thought, 'which has made him the dullest speaker in the Lords!'

Thomas Illing said, "By Gad, Vane, there's something in it. I shouldn't wonder if there's a devil of a lot in it!" Then with

his heavy chuckle, "The thing is that if it comes off—we should be in it. Eh, yes? Go ahead!"

Ferdie Blattly was the only one who had any practical ideas. "If it can be done, Gervase, you want a speciality. Food—good, place—spotless, service—excellent. All Sir Garnet. Weak point wine, my boy, wine! You and I know fellers—plenty of 'em—who'd go miles for something out of the ordinary. Let's see what can be done."

Now they were "doing something." They both watched the small, stout woman, she must be fifty or damned near it, with her neat, well-cut dress, her smooth brown hair in which no grey was to be seen. They both noted her bright, clear eyes, and the round firm chin. She was capable, that was certain; that she would never be coerced or driven was certain too.

She looked from one man to the other. Her hands were folded, she sat quite still, when she spoke her voice was steady, her accent faintly tinged with the North country pronunciation.

"I suppose, gentlemen," she said, "that you have some idea of forming a company, of putting up capital to enable me to take other and maybe larger hotels. I'm flattered, of course, any woman would be. I went into this business knowing little or nothing about it, my only wish being to provide for my children—I have four, you know—and carry on a work which my dear husband had begun, and of which he was proud. God has been very good to me; He has helped me through difficult times, and made it possible for me to learn. I don't know, gentlemen, that I want more responsibility, I don't know that I even want more money, or power or position. I have five hotels in the country, and the Ring of Bells and the Royal Lion in Callingly. I've an idea that's sufficient."

They were surprised, she saw that; saw, too, that they were disappointed, though they tried to hide it—these people didn't wear their hearts on their sleeves. She saw through it all. They had watched her, seen her success, and marked her down. They had position, influence, and money—but very rarely sufficient money for what they imagined to be their needs. They lived extravagantly, they lived as their fathers had lived before them in spite of the fact that the value of money was changing. You didn't get servants in these days for ten pounds a year. They asked fifteen or twenty, some of them wanted even more. But had Sir Gervase or Mr. Blattly cut down their staffs? Of course they hadn't! They hadn't learnt to think in terms of five pounds

here or six pounds there—not yet. Housemaids to them represented fifteen pounds a year, if they represented anything at all except necessities. They didn't realise that every mouth meant additional expense, that servants meant meat, and bread, butter and tea. If you told them that each additional servant meant at last an extra half pound of butter, they'd—as like as not—shrug their shoulders and tell you that, "The home farm supplies butter and milk," as if the bills for the home farm hadn't to be paid! Now they wanted to turn her into a Company, where she would have to answer to a Board of Directors or some such nonsense. The wine—that was right enough, she had felt for some time that Allop didn't know much about wine. He was all right with beer, stout and porter, he could break up bulk spirits quite efficiently, he was honest enough, but he knew nothing of the wine business. The only differences in wine were the colour and the price, if the cost of a bottle was high, Allop assumed that it was a good wine. They had given her a hint and she'd take it, but as for allowing herself to be absorbed into a company, she'd no intention of even considering it.

Mr. Blattly said, "We-e-ell, as our good friend here says, ambition goes for something, eh?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Then we must conclude that I am without ambition, Mr. Blattly."

She pronounced the word "*con-clude*" like a North-country woman, not *con-clude* as a Southerner would have done.

Sir Gervase rose, he still smiled, only his eyes showed his disappointment and surprise, he held out his large, well-kept hand.

"Mrs. Forest, madam, this has been a very pleasant meeting, even though you refuse to consider our little—and believe me, quite vague—project. We shall remember that it is a woman's privilege to change her mind, eh?"

She took his hand and shook it. "I shouldn't make too certain that all women do change their minds," she said. "All I know is that this one isn't given to it. I hope this won't make any difference to our very nice business relationship, Sir Gervase."

"Good gracious no! We know where to find the best, and the best can be found in your house, Mrs. Forest. Good-night."

"Good-night, and good-night to you, Mr. Blattly. I shall remember about the wine. The necessity for improvement, I mean."

She rang for the waiter to show them out. That was the kind of thing you did for gentry, as if they—having come up—didn't know the way down. Not that she minded, it was all part of the

tradition of running the place. James had said so often, "Let us always be as dignified as our customers, Elizabeth. It lessens the gap between our station and theirs without any presumption on our part. We know our place, they—if they are the kind of people we wish to encourage in the Royal Lion—know theirs."

As the two men walked down the stairs, Blattly said ruefully: "That was no go, Gervase. She likes to be the only cock crowing on her own midden, eh?"

Vane nodded. "You're right, Ferdie, all we did was to give her a tip about the wine!"

"I wonder where she'll get her advice."

"God knows, but she'll get it somewhere. I know that outwardly meek and essentially feminine type. They're stickers. Still, don't be too certain that there won't be an opening somewhere. What about the son? Good-looking fellow, nice manner, ambitious. I happen to know that. That kind of woman always adores her sons, and generally underrates her daughters. We'll see."

CHAPTER IV

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth woke as Mary, the stout chambermaid, brought in her early cup of tea. The time was a quarter to seven, and the light was still dim when Mary drew the heavy curtains.

"Light the gas, Mary," Elizabeth said. "I can't bear a dim light. It's so depressing. That's better."

Yet, as she lay there, sipping her tea, she did not feel depressed. Her mind went back to the events of last night, she reviewed them with satisfaction. The dinner had been a success, Sir Gervase Vane, and Mr. Blattly had been sufficiently impressed to feel that they wished to discuss the matter of a possible "company" with her. They had not come without backing. She knew that. They had come as representing other gentlemen, all probably richer and more influential than they were. Vane of Vane Conyers was important. Blattly of Harrick represented a good old family of no particular distinction, except that his grandfather, old Clare Blattly, had married four times and drunk harder than any man in the Three Ridings. There must be others interested—companies needed money—she doubted if either Vane or Blattly could put up as much hard cash as she could, if necessity called.

That could wait. She'd discuss turning her hotels into a company when she was ready, not before. It would need a lot of hard thinking. They had given her a hint about the wine, she'd never had occasion to learn.

'But,' she mused, 'there's not much I can't learn if I set my mind to it. And set my mind to it I will.'

What pleased her most in retrospect, was that she had been able to sit there, in Cavendish, quite late at night too, with those men and be a match for them. She had not been flustered, they had not shaken her, she had her answers ready, and had been able to give them in a voice which was calm and unhurried.

She smiled, and thought, 'Nay, they can't bounce me.'

Five years ago the thought of drinking champagne with Sir Gervase and Ferdinand Blattly would have thrown her into a state of nervous apprehension. She would scarcely have known whether to sit or stand. She would have flushed, twisted her fingers, and behaved like a fool. More, she would have given herself away. As it was, she had remained calm, and behaved as if drinking champagne—"The Widow" as they'd called it—were something which happened every day of the week.

She chuckled as she flung back the bedclothes and prepared to get up.

"I'm coming on pretty well," she said softly.

Then turning, she met the eyes of her late husband, looking down at her from the large photographic reproduction which she had had made from the oil painting which hung in her sitting-room. They seemed to her to hold at once pride and a faint hint of reproach. She remembered that for five years, ever since his death, her eyes had turned each morning to his picture. Before she had gazed on the world, as it were, she had fortified herself with looking at James' picture.

She murmured, "My dear husband—Oh, I hope that he would approve of everything I do!"

Dressed, her hair done smoothly and neatly, she left her room and went along to Cavendish. Annie, one of the housemaids, was just finishing the dusting. Elizabeth, at her desk, turned and said:

"Be very careful with that china, Annie. Remember that it is very valuable. I really must see about getting a proper cabinet for it all."

Annie nodded, "Aye—me gran'ma 'as some not onlike this 'ere," pointing to the piece of Wedgwood which Vane had admired. "She telled me as it weer reit old. A'hm just about sairtin as she'd gie it you, if you cared aboot it, m'am."

"Really? But give—no, I shouldn't dream of taking it as a gift. If you like to bring it here for me to see, I'll be glad to buy it."

"Naay—" the girl grinned. "Ah dean't know nowt aboot buyin'. She's 'ad it a longish time, reit old-fashioned a lot on 'er stoof is."

How Sir Gervase had admired her things! This had been "charming," the other had been "delightful." That was an idea. Seemingly these people liked old furniture, old china, preferring it to new. She might see what could be done. In imagination she heard herself saying that of course while the Royal Lion had modern rooms there were also rooms furnished with nothing but real—no, genuine was the word—old furniture. She might even hint that such rooms were furnished in an attempt to provide accommodation for people of taste.

She said, "Where does your grandmother live, Annie? Cluther Street—Number eleven. I might walk down there one day, if she's willing to sell, and her stuff appeals to me. I'm willing to pay a fair price for it."

Annie still grinned. "Why, aye, m'am. If you fancied doin' that Gran'ma'd be reit set oop wi' you callin'. 'Er and mi uncle ower at Dunford's both gotten a reit lot o' funny old things."

No sense in seeming over-anxious, Elizabeth thought.

"I'll come down one day," she said, as if making no promises.

Annie tucked her duster into the waistband of her apron, edged towards the door, saying, "Varry good, m' am, and thank you."

Elizabeth rang for Miss Armitage, told Mary to send word to cook that she was ready for breakfast, and wanted it at once. The clock showed that the time was nearly half past seven. She must be in the kitchen by eight.

Miss Armitage breakfasted with Elizabeth. The custom was convenient, it gave them an opportunity to discuss business while they ate, thus killing two birds with one stone. Percy always breakfasted in the coffee-room, where he could read his paper in peace.

"Good-morning, Miss Armitage."

"Good-morning, Mrs. Forest. How are you this morning?"

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

"Very well, thank you."

These questions and answers were never varied. They sat down, Miss Armitage poured out the tea, Elizabeth served the hot dish.

"Ah, grilled kidneys and bacon. I must say I am very partial to kidneys."

"So am I, Mrs. Forest. One of the most tasty of breakfast dishes, I always think. Particularly with our home-fed bacon. It's growing to be quite a feature with the visitors here, so Willet tells me."

"Oh, I'm glad of that. Frankly, Miss Armitage, I am all for encouraging features in the Forest Hotels. Home-fed bacon, home-made jams and marmalade, pickles and chutneys, and so forth. Country butter, eggs, fowls—there will have to be a certain amount of advertising," she laid a certain stress on the words which followed, "As we develop, and specialities count."

Miss Armitage laughed. "We're developing very fast, Mrs. Forest. When Sir Gervase Vane and Mr. Blattly left you last night, they came into the Small Smoke Room, and talked to me for quite a long time. They were both most affable. Most interested, too, in everything. Mr. Blattly said that the Royal Lion had dignity, and Sir Gervase agreed. He said, 'All Mrs. Forest's hotels have that. Nothing cheap or unworthy about any of them.' A very nice remark I thought."

Elizabeth nodded, half absently. "Very nice," she said mechanically. Then as the door opened, "Ah, Percy, good-morning. You're off to Forchester, aren't you?"

"Good-morning, Mama. Good-morning, Miss Armitage. Yes, just going. Any orders, madam?"

"Yes, tell Cousin Herbert that there's no call to send back any of the waste Burton or bitter to the brewers. Surely Tom Cavan can put that amount through his filter bag? Mild is another matter, but Burton and bitter cost good money." She added, "Tell him that—privately of course. Only Mr. Johnson of Barley's mentioned it to me the other day. Said that The Grand was just about the only hotel returning anything except mild beers."

"Very well. I'll be off then." He stooped and kissed her, nodded to Mary Armitage and went out.

"Ah, that's a good, reliable fellow," Elizabeth said. Mary Armitage glanced at her, thinking, 'When she says that, she means that she only wishes that Mr. Fredrick was as reliable as his brother Percy.'

II

During the morning Elizabeth went about her usual work—but the sense of satisfaction—that she had been able to

face Vane and Blattly unflinchingly, remained, in spite of the fact that she was still deeply concerned over their criticisms regarding her cellars. Cellar work, she could tackle that very well now, engines, stooping, tapping and "turn overs" were no longer mysteries to her. Harry Allop would have been better pleased, she thought, if she knew less. But wine—that was another pair of sleeves. Well, she had discovered a good many things, she'd discover this mystery of wine.

As she walked through the hall, she noted that there were a number of people on their way to the dining-room. Strangers, some of them, notably a tall woman, with very dark hair, wearing a magnificent tailored suit, with a large lace jabot. She demanded notice, by reason of her splendid carriage, her air of missing nothing. She stopped for a moment at the open window of the office where Miss Armitage sat, and Elizabeth watched the expression of respect and interest which spread itself over the face of her reception clerk and chief barmaid. She heard the tall woman say, "Many thanks—you won't forget, will you?" as she turned away and walked into the long, handsome dining-room.

Miss Armitage whispered, "Mrs. Forest—just a moment, please."

"Yes, Miss Armitage."

"That lady is Lady Bower. They live at Marlingly. He's the big agricultural implement-maker, you know. She's expecting him to join her. She said, 'When Sir Edward comes, my husband, tell him where to find me, if you please.' He's a very important gentleman."

"I've heard of him. Well, Sir Edward Bower and his lady won't have much to complain about with our luncheon. A beautiful saddle, a really fine sirloin, and one of cook's famous giblet pies." She laughed softly. "I'm not afraid of all the Lords and Ladies in creation."

She stood talking to some of the men who were entering the hotel. "Good-morning, Mr. Harrison, lunching here? Yes, a very good luncheon to-day. How are you, Mr. Stack? I think that you'll find the Stilton perfect. Yes, I'm proud of my Stiltons. Oh, that's very kind of you, I'm sure. Indeed, yes, Mr. Baines, I intend to go along some morning and see if Fredrick does well by his guests at the Ring of Bells. When? Ah, that I don't know. I'm always so busy——"

She broke off, to notice that Edward, the waiter, had come to the window with some order, and with a "Excuse me a moment, Mr. Baines," she went over, saying, "What is it, Edward?"

"Bottle of Number sixty-four, madam."

"Sixty-four, a claret, isn't it?"

"Yes, madam, Margow, six-and-six."

"Very well."

"Lady doesn't want it for half an hour. Wants the chill off it. She's waiting for someone, I fancy, madam."

"Very well—er—take the chill off it then."

She went back to talk to Jonas Baines; Charles Culver, the builder, came in and began to discuss with her some alterations which she was having made, Frank Miller talked to her of the necessity of placing a definite weekly order with him for eggs and butter. A tall, immensely stout man, looking larger than he was by reason of his very light, and rather pronounced tweeds, passed them. Miller nodded with a certain respect, saying, "Good-morning to you, Sir Edward."

The big man swung round, 'all in one piece' Elizabeth thought, and stared with rather protruding, light-blue eyes.

"Ah, Miller, how are you? Seen Lady Bower anywhere about?"

"I can't say that I have, Sir Edward."

Elizabeth said, "Lady Bower is waiting in the dining-room, Sir Edward."

"Oh—that so? Many thanks," and he went on his ponderous way.

Elizabeth entered the office. "Better go and get your luncheon, Miss Armitage. I'll hold the fort."

She always looked forward to the times when she took charge in the absence of the admirable Mary Armitage. She liked the appearance of the big ledgers and the well-bound register, the well-filled and beautifully kept shelves where the bottles stood, so that customers in the Small Smoking Room might be served quickly and easily. The brightly coloured liqueurs, the deep rich red of the cherry brandy or the sloe gin, the bright green of Crème de Menthe and the lighter shade of the Chartreuse, the yellow Chartreuse like pale sunshine caught and bottled. The cabinet which held the more aristocratic brands of cigars—how particular James had been that the cabinet must never be touched by either extremes of heat or cold!

She turned as someone tapped on the window ledge of the Small Smoking Room, and said, "Yes, Mr. Brownings?"

"Two large pale sherries, if you please, Mrs. Forest."

She filled the two glasses, put them on a tray, and set them on the window sill. Little Mr. Brownings said, in his queer,

soft voice that he appreciated the sherry at the Royal Lion very greatly. Elizabeth replied that they always tried to provide the best. It was then that she first heard the noise, someone speaking in a loud and angry voice, Edward, the waiter, replying.

"Tut, tut!" she said to Brownings, "I don't like this kind of thing in my hotel. Excuse me!"

She went back to the window of the office, Edward was following the tall woman, Lady Bower, out of the dining-room. Edward was obviously expostulating, walking half a pace behind, making futile flapping movements with his hand. The woman held a wine glass, and Elizabeth saw that in the hand which was not flapping Edward held a claret bottle.

"Where is the manager of this hotel?" Lady Bower was demanding, and demanding with considerable force. "I want to see him. It will give me the greatest pleasure to teach him——"

Elizabeth, leaning forward, so that her head protruded beyond the window, said quietly but distinctly, "There is no manager, madam. I am the proprietress. What did you wish to teach me? Edward, bring that bottle here and go back to the dining-room."

Lady Bower stood still, checked in her furious progress. She stared at Elizabeth, Elizabeth stared back, unflinching. She had faced two gentlemen last night, had held her ground, and she could hold it against this woman.

"Yes, madam? What can I do for you? Is something the matter with the wine?"

Lady Bower came nearer, her stare was still angry, but a hint of surprise tinged it. She still held the glass of wine in her hand. "You run this place, eh?" she demanded. "Are you responsible for this—this"—she set down the glass and pointed to it with a gesture of disgust—"this damned stuff!"

So this was the famous Lady Bower, Elizabeth reflected. This was the woman who could curse like a man, who—who—For a moment her brain halted—the coincidence was astounding—this was the woman who ran and directed the greatest wine dealers in England. Lady Bower was Coster's. The handsome face was full of fury, the eyes were hard, the fine figure seemed to hold intense annoyance in every line.

"If you have complaints to make, madam," Elizabeth said, "would you be so good as to come into the office? Also, kindly refrain from using bad language to me. I don't like it, and I don't permit it."

Claudia Bower stared. Elizabeth thought, 'That's finished that. She and her huge, ungainly husband will walk out and never come back. Very well, if they do, they do, and that's all there is to it.'

"Oh, you don't like it, eh? Listen, my good lady, I say what I please, to whom I please. Don't try to bully me—I don't allow anyone to bully me, let me tell you."

"I see—you think that you have the monopoly?"

"What?" She almost shouted the word, then suddenly her face changed, the anger died, the eyes lit up with amusement. "By God, that's funny. I have a monopoly, have I? That wouldn't surprise me in the least. Here, Mrs. Whatever—your—name is—let me come into this famous office and talk to you." She pushed open the door, and still holding the wine glass, glanced round her. "You keep this place very nicely," she admitted half grudgingly. "Just send for that waiter of yours, will you? Tell him to ask my husband if he's finished his meal. The Stilton looked good, by the way. If he has, he'd better have a brandy. Have you a decent brandy?"

"I have an Otard '78. And a '75."

"Um-m-m. Better than nothing. Yes, that's all right. He's something of an authority on brandy."

Almost shyly, Elizabeth ventured, "I have an old bottle here—I don't really know what it is. It is very old. I believe that it is nearly a hundred years old."

"Let me see it."

Elizabeth took down the bottle, dusted it carefully and handed it to Lady Bower. "I don't really know—it may have nothing to recommend it."

Pursing her lips, Claudia Bower emitted a long, low whistle. "Unless I've forgotten everything I ever knew," she said, "it's 1809. Fine Champagne. Something of a find, believe me."

Encouraged, Elizabeth said, "Oh, excuse me, I don't think that it is champagne—I have champagne, and the bottles are not that shape at all."

The last of the annoyance died from Claudia Bower's face. She grinned like a schoolboy, and for the first time Elizabeth Forest realized how beautiful she was.

She said, "Lord! This is astonishing. As Gus Elen sings—you dunno where you are, do you? My dear woman, someone has got to take you in hand. Send that bottle along to my husband, and tell him that I know what it's worth, and that I shall make out the bill for him to pay. You've got a cellar, I

suppose—you don't slip round to the grocer's and buy your wine as you want it, do you? No, I'm not being rude. Here, before that bottle—which you say isn't champagne, and how right you are!—goes, just have it opened and join me in a glass of it. No, damn it, that's not the way to open a bottle. Let me do it, give me a clean napkin, will you? Thanks. That's right. Now—this——” She pointed to the half-empty glass and the opened bottle of claret. “You know what you're charging for this?”

“Six-and-sixpence.”

“That's it. It may be worth six-and-six, worth at least the greater part of that sum, but that fool of a waiter doesn't know what ‘taking the chill off’ means. The temperature of the *room*—not the bath-room, the dining-room! Sixty to sixty-five. I fancy that he stuck this bottle into a bucket of hot water to ‘take the chill off.’ Ruined it. Mind, it's not a great wine, it's a pleasant enough wine, about ten years old I should say.” She laughed. “Mind this, it won't wear as well as you or I. Don't keep it longer than is necessary, let it make way for better stuff.”

Elizabeth listened, she knew that she was face to face with an opportunity. Here was a woman—a specialist in wine—who could tell her all that she needed to know. She could let Lady Bower talk, she could interpolate from time to time, “Exactly what I felt,” or “Yes, of course I realize that,” assuming a knowledge which she had not, and so far as she could see never would have, unless this queer, attractive, outspoken woman came to her aid. Watching her closely, Elizabeth Forest knew that “shams” were no use here. This Lady Bower might have many faults, might have drunk a glass of old brandy far too quickly—James had always disliked to see women drink brandy, except for medicinal purposes—she swore, she shouted, but you couldn't meet those clear, wide-apart eyes and not understand that she had the ability to detect shams, pretences and mental dishonesties.

“The trouble is,” Elizabeth spoke steadily, though her cheeks flushed at the humiliation of the admission which she was going to make, “that I don't know better stuff if I find it. I don't know anything about it. I know that claret and port are red, that champagne fizzes in the glass, and—that's about all.”

Claudia gave a great shout of laughter. “Even then you're wrong—those peculiarities are not to be relied on. You mean to tell me that you don't know anything about wine—nothing? Damn it, you must know something, or do you rely on your cellarman?”

"Allop's good so far as the beer is concerned, he knows where the different wines are kept, but I doubt if he's ever drunk any wine, except a glass of port at Christmas, in his life." Very rapidly, and very simply she told Claudia Bower how she came to take over the running of the Forest Houses, she touched lightly on her difficulties and admitted that only last night Sir Gervase Vane and Mr. Ferdinand Blattly had suggested that she ought to stock better and more distinctive wines.

"Gervase Vane—well," doubtfully, "he may know something about wine, that self-satisfied little fool of a Ferdie Blattly knows very little more than you do. He's the kind of ass who judges cigars 'by the picture on the box.' Well, Mrs.—Forest, is it?—Mrs. Forest, I like your pluck. You've fired my imagination. I want to help you. You've got a good hotel, in the middle of a good neighbourhood. Thomas Illing would drive thirty miles to taste that old brandy of yours. So would twenty more of the men who live around here. My husband, for one, if I didn't happen to have some even older at Marlingly. What you want is a small cellar but an exclusive one. Keep the Château la Pompe for the people who—*don't know*. Remember that word Château may mean a great deal, or not a blasted thing. D'you want my help, my advice?"

"Indeed, Lady Bower, I do."

"You're prepared to spend money? Oh, don't think that I'm after you as a customer, believe me, I have all the customers I need. I want to see your cellars, here and in those other hotels of yours. Give me a week to look round, ask questions, suggest alterations, find out if your cellar-men are up to their work. A cellarman can make or break you, never forget that! During the week make up your mind what you're prepared to spend. I'll let you have an estimate, take it or leave it." She sprang up and held out her hand. "There you are, Mrs. Forest. There's my hand on it." She held out a rather large, but well-shaped hand, and Elizabeth thought that her grip was that of a man—an honest man. It gave you confidence, made you feel that with Claudia Bower behind you nothing was impossible.

"I am grateful, indeed I am," she said, her voice suddenly shaking a little.

"Bless the woman, if she's not all upset about it!" Lady Bower cried. "Nay, this 'ul never do. I want you to meet my husband, to see how much of that brandy he's put away while we talked. I'll make out the bill for it. That brandy's worth—what?—three pounds a bottle. Mind, I'm not paying for that

muck your waiter called 'Margow'—don't expect me to." There was a knock at the door of the office, Lady Bower called, "What is it? Come in!" then added, "Sorry, Mrs. Forest, forgot that I wasn't in my own place. Oh, it's you, Edward," as the door opened and the huge figure of Edward Bower appeared. "Mrs. Forest—my husband, Edward Bower."

Sir Edward, puffing a little, said, "How d'do, Mrs. Forest. D'you mind if I sit down. Thanks." He lowered himself into a chair, and blinked his eyes. "I've been half asleep. D'you know that you've been yattering here for three quarters of an hour, Claudie? Tut, tut, the fuss you made over that wine! Positively ashamed of you. Very naughty! Wretched waiter looked as if he thought you were going to brain him with the bottle. I hope that you made her apologise, Mrs. Forest."

"I didn't, Sir Edward. I was wrong and she was right. Lady Bower has made me a most generous offer, and I am so very, very grateful to her. I shall never forget it, never."

"Ah!" He looked at his wife, his eyes suddenly tender. "Ah—that's the way things are, eh? You've done it again, Claudie? Always the same, behaves terribly, makes scenes and fusses, disgraces herself, and then—gets the right side of the people she's insulted. Oh, a very terrible woman, my wife!"

Claudia, taking out a cigarette case and selecting a cigarette, spoke to him over her shoulder as she looked for matches, "Mrs. Forest won't agree with you."

"No one ever does—I'm only the poor devil who married you. I ought to know."

III

They had gone. Lady Bower was coming back the day after to-morrow.

"Mind," she had warned Elizabeth, "I want to see everything."

"You shall see all my dreadful skeletons—in the cellar," Elizabeth promised.

Sipping her tea, as she sat alone in her room, Elizabeth was conscious that she was tired. Being with Claudia Bower was like walking uphill with a strong wind in your face. Yet she was charming, and kindly. Extraordinary too. Swearing like some navvy, smoking cigarettes—Elizabeth had never seen a woman smoke before. She had heard that the Countess smoked cigars, but she had always maintained that it was mere gossip.

The cellars should be stocked, she would learn to distinguish

between which wines were good, or pleasant, and those which could be described as notable, distinguished, or—rare. She would learn which brandies should be spoken of with profound respect, which were merely “sound.”

The idea of specialities obsessed her. She imagined men of taste telling one another of the cellars of the Forest Hotels, of the home fed hams, the ripe Stiltons, the perfect saddles of mutton, the noble sirloins. A chef—yes, but a cook as well. A cook who knew how to make Yorkshire pudding, who understood the secret of good “black puddings.” “No, my lord, they may not be everyone’s taste, but I will say that there are none in Yorkshire to beat ours. Like our veal-and-ham pies, our ham-and-egg pies, another speciality, my lord, our steak, kidney, mushroom and oyster puddings, and many other things. Yes, we’re specialists, my lord, and proud of it.”

That was how she would talk.

She rose and rang the bell, when Annie came, she gave her orders.

“Tell Hemer to send round to Mr. Allison—the stationer’s. Ask him to kindly step along and bring with him patterns of leather for binding. Yes, binding. Books, my good girl, books! Say that I want to talk to him about a new wine list.”

She returned to sip her tea, relaxed and content. She thought, ‘Six months ago I should have gone to see Tom Allison.’ And for the second time that day, she glanced up at her husband’s portrait, giving a little start as she did so. ‘Dear James, how pleased he would be,’ she thought, then ‘I must tell cook to have a special luncheon—up here, I think—when Lady Bower comes. Yes—a really good soup, perhaps a couple of ducklings with green peas. Bit late for peas, but cooked with care they’ll be all right. Some of those nice potato baskets cook makes—they’re a novelty. And a savoury, I think, not a sweet. Oh, and some cigarettes!’

CHAPTER V

FREDRICK

HE walked away from the Royal Lion towards the Old Market Place, he wanted to have a look at the Ring of Bells. Not that he hadn’t seen it a thousand times before, but to see it as Fredrick Forest was one thing, to see it as the future proprietor was another. A much more pleasant thing.

There it stood, two-storied with dormer windows sticking out in the red-tiled roof. Black and white, severe and yet delightful. Character, that was what it had. The place must be a good deal older than the Royal Lion—he must get its exact history from old Swan or Baines. His father-in-law, Dr. Ben Harrison, might have some information.

A booklet. Illustrated with etchings or neat woodcuts, giving the history of the place, with one or two bits of gossip about Charles the Second—"Butcher" Cumberland on his way North to smash Charles Edward, Dr. Johnson, Nelson perhaps. Fredrick smiled. They might or might not have stayed there. No harm in assuming that they had done so. People might fight shy of history, but they liked historical gossip. Yes, he'd talk to Wrench and Small about the booklet. Good paper, good print, nicely finished. It ought to look very well—The Ring of Bells, Callingly. Proprietor Fredrick Forest. Might even give his mother a little free advertising. Something such as—"run in conjunction with the Royal Lion" and the rest of her hotels. She had come to see at last that he must have a responsible job. At twenty-eight he wasn't going to run round the country going errands—that was what his work had amounted to. Damned undignified. Calvert, and Moss and Preston, the new manager at the Bay Mare, Frank Prellis, and even his mother's own cousin at Forchester, all looking down their noses when he made a suggestion, and if he ever gave an order always the same response:

"You'll let me have confirmation about that from your mother, won't you, Mr. Fredrick?" or "Nay, I'm taking no orders unless they come direct from Cousin Elizabeth, Fred." Made you feel helpless, of no account, childish. Well, once he got into the Ring of Bells he would show them all what he could do.

He crossed the cobble stones of the Old Market Place, worn round and smooth with years of traffic. Old Baines said they had been laid down nearly two hundred years ago. They'd seen some changes—just as the Ring of Bells would see some changes once the name of Fredrick Forest went up over the door, stating that he was licensed to sell wine, beer and spirits, and to deal in tobacco. He squared his shoulders, conscious that he made a good figure. He knew that men and women noticed him, and the knowledge gave him considerable pleasure. Only last night Harold Wrench had said: "All right for you, Fred, to wear light clothes, checks and so forth, you can carry them off. I have to stick to something less daring. Your figure can stand individual-looking clothes,

mine can't." Now he brushed a tiny piece of fluff off his coat sleeve, and noticed with satisfaction the excellent quality of the cloth. Nice colour too, that rather warm brown, just the thing for a bright autumn day, the neat check trousers too were distinctly good. Something after the style of the old-fashioned "sponge bag," he could remember hearing his father refer to a pair of checked trousers—only in black and white—as "shepherd's plaid." Double collars, too, were a marked improvement on the old chokers. His smile widened. He recalled the collars his father had worn, must have been two and a half inches high. The old joke had been that men who affected very high collars were like donkeys looking over whitewashed walls. Not that the remark applied to his father—not likely. The Guv'nor had been a grand fellow, everyone said that. A little rigid, more than a trifle narrow, but decent and upright.

As Fredrick entered the Ring of Bells, he thought, 'I'm pretty certain that he would have approved of my having a place of my own.'

He stood for a moment, leaning on his stick, surveying the entrance hall.

A voice said, "Hello, Fred, coming to spy out the land?"

He turned, and faced Charlie Small, the proprietor. A tall, thin fellow, with a narrow chest and a perpetual cough. George Small's second cousin.

Fredrick said, "Well, you're going, Chuck—and my mother has an idea of taking the place for me. Sorry that you're going."

Small laid a thin hand on his chest, and said mournfully but with a hint of restrained pride, "Got to, lad. Dr. Ben was here this morning. Says I'm getting worse, told me that he'd rarely seen the disease get such a grip on anyone in such a short time. Told me that I drank too much. I thought that a bit hard, eh, Fred?"

"I should say that it is! Poof, what a thing to say!"

He hoped that he made his words sound convincing. He wasn't going to start preaching to poor old Charlie. Why upset the fellow, he looked as if he had one foot in the grave already.

"You've never seen me tight, have you, Fred?" Small asked anxiously. "Never seen me when I wasn't completely master of any situation, have you?"

"Good Lord, never!"

He thought, 'No, that's true enough, but it's because the seasoned cask lasts the longest. Still—poor old Chuck!'

"Have a drink with me, Fred," Small said. "Just for luck, eh?"

"I don't mind, thanks."

"I've only had one to-day—going very carefully. Have to go carefully. Good thing I never married, isn't it?" He wagged his head solemnly. "May have squinted over the hedge, may have slipped up now and then, but always kept clear of marriage. What's yours?"

"Light ale, thanks."

"Mine's a—let's see, what shall I have? I think a brandy might do me good, Miss Fellows. Yes, a brandy—make it a big one."

Beatrice Fellows said, "Very good, Mr. Small. Good-morning, Mr. Forest."

Fredrick said, "Good-morning, Miss Fellows," with considerable warmth.

Bee Fellows was a smart girl, almost handsome. Fine, full figure though she couldn't be very old—twenty-five or six?

George Small said that Charlie slept with her. In that case she might leave when he did, Fredrick decided. He hoped that she wouldn't. Good-looking barmaids were an asset.

He leant against the little counter of the Private Bar, in an attitude which was graceful and negligent. Small drank his brandy in a couple of gulps, panted and wiped his moustache with the back of his hand.

Fredrick thought, 'If my moustache grew as weedily as his does, I'd shave the damn thing off. Looks as if the moth had been at it.' Aloud he said, "Now, Chuck, just another—with me—for luck. That's the style. Same again, Miss Fellows. Will you join us?"

"Very kind of you. A small port, thank you, Mr. Forest."

"Want to have a look over the place, Fred?" Small said.

"Well, if it's not a great deal of trouble——"

"Not a bit. I'll look after the bar, Miss Fellows, just show Mr. Forest round, will you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Small."

As they mounted the wide, shallow stairs, Bee Fellows said softly and confidentially, "He wanted to stay down there so that he could have another. He's getting dreadful, you know. Can't leave it alone."

"Tut, tut! That's bad."

"What I always say is that if you can't have a drink and know when you've had enough, leave it alone. I've always said that and I always shall, Mr. Forest."

"How wise you are, my dear."

She showed him the various rooms, he noted that the wall-papers were old and dingy, the paint flaking here and there, the carpets faded, and in one or two places threadbare. Very different from the Lion. The bedrooms were old-fashioned, some of the beds had begun to sag in the middle.

Fredrick nodding in the direction of a large double bed said that it looked as if it had gone through some pretty hard wear.

Miss Fellows pursed her mouth, with an obvious effort to restrain a smile, and said—with over-done primness, "They've seen their best days, most of them, I will say."

"Are you going when poor old Charlie leaves, Miss Fellows?"

She opened her china-blue eyes very wide. "Oh, no! That is, if you don't keep me on I shall have to find a new position. I've got to live. No one to depend on except myself. I'm an orphan."

He said quickly, "No question of not keeping you on. Shall count myself very lucky if you'll stay. I feel that I could—rely on you."

Her voice held respectful enthusiasm as she answered, "Oh, Mr. Forest, what a kind thing to say, and—what a weight you've taken off my mind! D'you know, I was so frightened you'd not want me here."

Fredrick slipped his arm round her waist, and pressed it slightly. The action was, he felt, friendly and reassuring, in addition it was a very nice waist, and the fact that he felt her whole body incline, almost imperceptibly, towards him made him feel pleasantly expectant as to what the future might hold.

"Rest assured, my dear," he said. "I know a good thing when I see it. I shan't let you go."

Back in the hall, Charlie stared out at the world with blurred eyes. "S'sheen the place?" he asked. "Wanshs a lot doing to it."

"Yes, a good deal. Still, it's a nice old place."

"Nisch old plasch," Charlie agreed. "I'm shorry to go, but I'm too ill to manage it, far too ill. Dunno how I'd gerr'on without Beatrish Fellows. Mainstay of the plasch. Good girl, Fred. Very good, strict-living, moral girl. *I know*. Schristian girl—straight, honest, more like m' sister than m' barmaid an' book-keeper."

As Fredrick walked out into the bright autumn sunshine he smiled. 'If I'd given him time he might have found some more adjectives and attributes to apply to Miss Fellows.'

Had anyone asked Fredrick Forest whether he loved his wife, he would have stared at them in astonishment, and replied with

considerable force that he was devoted to her, adding, that he virtually lived for his wife and children.

He loved Grace, there were times when he admired her, when he wanted to make love to her; there were times—and he scarcely admitted this even to himself—when she bored him to extinction, and when he wished that she had a little more “go” in her. He had married in 1891—on New Year’s Day. He remembered how cold the day had been, and how Grace had shivered suddenly as she stood beside him at the altar rails. She had looked very lovely on her wedding day. She was tall and fair with a fine skin.

She had been entirely innocent and completely ignorant. Looking back he knew that his honeymoon had been a difficult time. He had tried to explain, to reason, and she had wept, saying, “But it’s all so—dreadful, Freddie!” Adding as she dabbed her eyes, “I think that it’s a shame that girls are brought up in such ignorance.”

He had been shocked, deeply shocked, and had protested that innocence was a lovely and beautiful thing, a thing which touched and affected men, decent men, profoundly.

Grace with unexpected spirit replied, “I didn’t say anything about innocence, I said ignorance. *You’re* neither—are you?”

“I’m a man, my darling. Men are different, less spiritual.”

“Who says so?” she demanded.

“Everyone—it’s an accepted fact.”

She had returned to dabbing her eyes, and sniffed a little.

“I expect that—accepted fact was invented by men.”

No, there had been difficult moments on that honeymoon, but they had passed and he returned with Grace to the villa on the Rawley Road, which his father and mother had furnished as a wedding present for them. Grace had become resigned to the problems of married life, and that life was very pleasant. There had admittedly been times before their first child was born when Fredrick had resented the fact that she expected him to stay at home while she made clothes for the baby. When he had gone into the town, come home—not late, but later than Grace thought permissible under the circumstances, there had been tears. He loathed to watch a woman cry.

The baby was born late in November, and he remembered, with a certain sense of approval, that his father-in-law, sitting with him in the dining-room, waiting to hear news of the arrival of the child from old Dr. Simon Thirk, had said, “Tut, tut, my dear boy, nothing to make a fuss about! When you’ve been through this as often as I have you’ll not give it a thought.”

He had felt the remark both foolish and inhuman at the time. When Thirk came down and said, "Why, Fred—pretty good for a first try. He's a bonny little lad. All of nine pounds," Fredrick had buried his face in his hands and felt the tears against his fingers.

When the second child, Gladys, was born two years later, he had been—he told himself—as deeply moved though less obviously affected.

"No man of any heart," he told George Small, "could help realising what the birth of a child means."

Small had replied that he knew quite well enough what it meant. He added, "Five bob a week! You're not the only father in the world, Fred."

Good fellow George, but coarse, there was no doubt about it.

The third child, Francis, had been premature, and Grace had been very ill. A worrying time, and even though Francis was turned a year old now, and perfectly all right, Fred felt vaguely uncomfortable when he remembered the night of his birth and the hours which preceded it.

Grace had discovered something—or thought that she had discovered something—to his discredit. A girl over at Clatton, in the Black Bull. He'd almost forgotten her name. Emily something-or-other. Wilson, Watson—it didn't matter. A bad piece of goods if ever there had been one—he and Wrench and Small were all in entire agreement about that. They'd all larked about a bit, you couldn't really give it a harsher name. Partly Grace's fault after all. She'd felt ill, said she did anyway, though Thirk said that she was all right. "Bit pulled down, nothing serious." Those had been Thirk's own words. "Nothing serious." Got to be worse before she's better." Grace didn't realise the strain it was to stay at home, evening after evening, listening to long accounts of her headaches, her lack of appetite, her fixed belief that she was going to die when that child was born. His nerves were in ribbons. Wrench said that he looked five years older seven months before the baby was due. Small said, "Lord, anyone would think that you were carrying the child, Freddie—for God's sake be your old self. You're like a mute at a funeral."

They got into the way of driving over to Clatton. Not often, maybe a dozen times in all. They had, perhaps, overstepped the mark a bit, and after all—they were none of them monks or priests or anything like it. Life wasn't easy for him at the time. There had been a row. Old "Brat" Thomas, at the Black Bull, made a fuss, talked about the girl's character.

Small had said, "Blast it, this is the first time I knew she had any character—except a damn bad 'un."

"Brat" stormed, said she was his sister's child, and he'd see her done right by. Well, they'd done right by her, they'd all paid up, and she'd married a fellow from her own part of the country and gone to one of the colonies—Australia, Africa, he didn't know which or where.

Somehow Grace heard of it. How he never knew. Grace had sobbed out, "Don't imagine that I shall tell your mother, and I pray no one ever tells my father. He'd send my brothers to thrash you within an inch of your life. What your mother would do I dare not think. You've broken my heart——"

Of course he hadn't broken her heart. But she'd upset herself, and the baby had been born a couple of months too soon. Grace had been pretty ill, and he went through hell. That was one of the penalties you paid for being so sensitive and tender-hearted. She'd been all right again, he'd taken her away to Brighton, and given her a bracelet she fancied. She had said that it was like a second honeymoon. She'd never mentioned the matter of the girl at Clatton again, but once or twice she'd said things which made him vaguely apprehensive.

"Do you think that Agnes Mortlake is attractive, Freddie?" and when he declared that she held no charms for him, she said in a meditative fashion, "Oh, someone—I forget whom—told me that you did. What rubbish people talk!"

Last week, she had said, "I saw Mrs. Matt Walker in town this morning. What a very vulgar-looking woman she is! They say that she was a barmaid in Stockport before Matt Walker married her."

He had looked over his paper and said, "Some barmaids are damn' good looking. Witness Mary Armitage at my mother's."

"Oh, do you admire"—she'd made a sudden stop there, and then gone on—"Miss Armitage then?"

All unimportant, but inclined to make him uncomfortable. As a matter of fact Mrs. Matt Walker was more Harold Wrench's friend than his. He'd been to her house with Harold, and—had felt that he did cut a better figure than poor old Harold. Harold might be the salt of the earth, but he did lack that lightness of touch which appealed to women. Once or twice he had caught Mrs. Matt's eye, and felt—difficult to say exactly what he *had* felt—faintly excited, amused, interested. He liked women, he admitted it, found them stimulating, and women apparently liked him. No harm in it, very few fellows were as devoted to

their wives and children as Fred Forest. He had said, during one of their intimate conversations, to George Small, "I don't say that I'm a saint. I don't particularly want to be one, but this I *will* say—neither my wife nor my children have ever gone short of anything, not material things or affection and devotion. I love them dearly, and they love me."

George had said that if all men could say the same with truth, the poor old world would be a better place for everyone.

He was affectionate, he admitted it. No shame in being loving to your family. He loved his mother—as he had loved the dear old Guv'nor. A splendid woman, capable, just, altogether fine. Just a little lacking in faith perhaps, but she'd put that right now, and he was going to show her how right she'd been to trust him. He'd make a real "go" of the Ring of Bells, make it as good, in its way, as the Royal Lion. One thing he was good at—details. He might not know so much about this and that, but details—! He halted suddenly. Details! That reminded him. How many drinks did you get out of a bottle of whisky? He must find that out and be ready to tell his mother when he saw her to-morrow. Piece of luck that he was just passing the Roebuck, old Joe Masters' place. He turned into the Private Bar, and nodded to Joe. Years ago, Masters had been a prize fighter, back in the days of Mace, and Corbett and Fitzsimmons; now he kept a pub, and had a crooked nose and a couple of cauliflower ears.

"'Afternoon, Joe."

"'Affernoon, Mr. Forest. 'Ow's fings wiv you? Pretty nice? Thet's good ter 'ear! Glarse o' bitter? Thenks, I don't keer if I do jine you. Mine's a pig's ear, sime as wot your'n is. No, on second f'oughts, an' it's all the sime ter you, I'll mike it a 'I'm, ser."

Fredrick said, "Let's see—'I'm ser'—I've forgotten that one."

"'I'm ser frisky'—got thet?"

"Whisky, of course! I say, Joe, how many goes do you get out of a bottle?"

Joe closed one eye. "Derpends on 'ow clever I am, or 'ow bosky me customer is. Jest mi fun! Firty-two—usin' a five art measure.

"Five art——?"

"Five quarters art of a aristotle——"

"Oh, and sherry and port?"

"In a Arry of Port er sherry—ten er eleven."

Fredrick laughed, "Aristotle—bottle, short for same—Arry, eh?"

"'it the bull's eye the very fust time! Theerfore—a arry of I'm ser—is a aristotle of I'm ser frisky—bottle o' whisky. Nah, yer got it all orf. No, thenks, not anuvver, Mr. Fred. Any toime as yer wants a lesson, yer ole schoolmaster 'ul be 'ere. Goo' dai ter yer."

He continued his walk home, repeating softly, "Whisky, gin, brandy, thirty-two; port, sherry, eleven or possibly only ten."

As he swung open the gate, two children rushed towards him from the garden where they were playing, James and Gladys. They clutched his knees, shouting that he should pick them up and give them a ride. They were dear little children, Fredrick felt a sudden rush of tenderness which almost overwhelmed him; he felt tears start to his eyes. They were his children—their future depended upon him, and his efforts. He stooped and picked them up, one under each arm, crying as he did so, "Two sacks of flour for mother! Two fine, heavy sacks of flour to make into puddings and pies."

Grace was crossing the little hall as he entered, she held Francis in her arms, and turned smiling to the little group in the doorway. How handsome Freddie looked, laughing, so animated, making the two children shout and scream with excitement.

He called, "I've brought two bundles of rubbish for Mrs. Forest!"

Nurse called over the stairs, "Cum your waays oop, all on you. The dinner's on the taable." Then, descending a few stairs, "Shall Ah tak' Francis, m'um?" Grace held out the little boy, who went to the elderly woman readily enough. "Theer's thee nannie's own chuckle 'en! A reit luvverly dinner waiting fur 'im, bless 'is bonnie faace."

As Frederick walked into the dining-room with his arm round his wife's waist he said, half ruefully, "I hope they won't all grow up to talk broad Yorkshire. Still, she's a treasure, is that old nannie of yours. Queer to think that she once nursed you, called you her 'chuckie hen,' isn't it?"

He sat down, unfolded his napkin, and leant back in his chair while Grace carved, and served the vegetables. He hated carving, and had never troubled to learn to do it properly. He watched her, his eyes appreciative.

"How well you carve! How well you do everything! And—how charming you look to-day!"

She blushed, glanced up at him, and said, "Oh, Freddie!"

"It's true, and you know it. There isn't a woman in Callingly to touch you. There isn't a family like mine, or a home so well

run, so beautifully kept. It's almost a pity—" he spoke more slowly, "that we have to leave here."

"Leave here! What do you mean?"

"At last my mother has decided that I can be trusted to give and not only take orders. I'm to have the Ring of Bells! No, no—don't look worried. There's a fine old garden, splendid rooms—I've seen them to-day—some of them. Grace, I'm going to make a fine thing of it, we're both going to make a fine thing out of it. New papers on the walls, new bright paint, carpets—a dozen things. It's going to be a gem by the time you and I have finished there. Mark my words."

"Oh!" She brought him his plate, and stood for a moment with her hand on his shoulder. "Oh, Freddie—can I really help you? With no housework, and Nannie for the children I shall have plenty of time. I am good at managing—even you say that, don't you?"

He sprang up, caught her in his arms, and kissed her.

"I've a secret for you. If I hadn't you, I should be just a little afraid of tackling it. With you—I don't know what fear means. I'm the world's most fortunate fellow—perfect hotel, or it will be, and the perfect wife to run it with me."

Laughing she pushed him away, very gently.

"Eat your dinner while it's hot."

CHAPTER VI

FREDRICK

HE had been in possession at the Ring of Bells for nearly two months, and still felt a thrill of pleasure as he descended the shallow stairs each morning, ready to begin the day's work. He did not come down very early, but then, as he pointed out to Grace, he never came to bed until so late.

"Make a point of never coming up until everyone is off the premises. I may not be needed," he smiled, "though I am sufficiently conceited to believe that I am *wanted*, but in case of any difficulty, argument, unpleasantness, I want them to feel that I am on the spot."

He came down the stairs slowly, he liked to savour to the full the improvements which had been made. Gone was the dark, greasy-looking flock wall-paper, the dark paint shone with polishing, the brass twinkled at him as he passed. Charles Small's

dreadful stuffed birds, standing on brackets without glass coverings to them, had been banished, "and with them, believe me," Frederick said, "sufficient moth to eat every bit of wool in Callingly." The shabby carpets had been replaced with new ones, those disgusting old beds—positive instruments of torture—had gone. Grace had been clever about curtains, bedspreads and such-like, his mother had stinted nothing, she had spent money like water, and here he was on this sunny, if cold morning in November, ready to begin work in an hotel which was a credit to anyone.

"Morning, Miss Fellows. Lovely bright morning!"

She turned, a glass and polishing cloth in her hand, and smiled. Nice smile she had, good teeth. He hated women with poor teeth—or men either for that matter. His own were perfect.

"Good-morning, Mr. Forest. You won't forget to order me those little plants from Swaine's, will you? They'll brighten up these shelves so much."

"I shan't forget," he assured her. "Do I ever forget things?" Then speaking very softly, "Anything you ask me to remember, at least."

She made no comment, only met his eyes steadily. That was the best of Bee Fellows, she never took advantage, anything in the way of an advance had to come from him. Never presumed either. Always very markedly respectful to Grace—which, after all, was only right. By Jove, he'd have something to say to anyone who didn't show proper respect to his wife! They'd not be long in the Ring of Bells.

"Do you want anything up this morning?" he asked.

"Whisky—Gin—" her eyes ranged the glass shelves, "three more sherries, there's plenty of port. I told Frank about soda water and minerals earlier on."

Frederick noted her wants in his book, nodded and said, "I'll see to it."

He might joke with her, more than once he had snatched a kiss—oh, a sufficiently innocent one!—from her, but he knew when to banish all lightness and to be strictly businesslike. He passed on to the smoking-room, his eyes darting here and there in search of anything which did not suit his meticulous demands. He picked up an ash tray, surveyed it with disgust, then rang the bell.

A thin fellow wearing a baize apron answered it.

Frederick held out the offending ash tray. "Look at that!"

"Must 'a missed that 'un, sir."

Frederick shook his head. "We can't afford to miss anything, Tom. If we do, before we know where we are we shall be missing

customers. That sawdust in the spittoons fresh? Ah, look at that! The calendar not changed! Tom, you've got to keep your eyes open. I've too much to do to be dry-nursing you. I must get some new frames for the day bills. Ask when you go past the theatre and the Empire if they don't supply them, Tom. We show their confounded bills, they ought to supply the frames to put 'em in. Fair's fair."

He passed on to the Saloon Bar, went down into the cellar and gave his orders to Jimmie, the cellar man. He had learnt sufficient to make it appear that he knew a good deal. The wines scarcely concerned him. He left that to his mother, who had suddenly developed a kind of passion for them. She and Lady Bower between them were making the Royal Lion talked about. Old fogies mostly, young men didn't care a lot about wine, and his own customers were mostly young. Small and Wrench, Clark and Staley wouldn't pay a lot of money for a bottle of wine because it had some high-flown name.

His cellar was a small place, plenty of room for barrels, and that was what sold the best—beer and spirits.

"Order written out, Jimmie? They like that new I.P.A. Good stuff. Have you stooped number four? Warn them in the bar to pull easy on it. And here"—handing him a leaf torn from his note book—"get that lot up to Miss Fellows in the Private Bar."

That was the way to talk to men. Briskly, smartly, as if you knew what you wanted and intended to see that you got it.

Women wanted handling differently. Needed a pleasant word, a smile, a little jocularly. Cheered them up, made them feel that you took a personal interest in them.

He walked into the big kitchen, with its long white table, and big cooking range. Grace was standing there, talking to the cook. The cook was new—the second they had employed at the Bells. The first one whew, what a tartar! Drunk as a lord by mid-day on the Thursday—market day. Farmers coming in to the farmer's ordinary, and the cook helpless on the kitchen floor until he and Tom carried her up to her bedroom.

He had been flustered, he didn't mind admitting it. After all, the kitchen wasn't his province. He had said that they'd better send down to the Royal Lion and ask if his mother could let them have some joints, pies—anything. Grace had said—very quietly too—that she could manage.

"If I can cook a dinner for four people, I can cook one for forty, Freddie. Leave it to me." She had turned to Lizzie and Pollie, the kitchen-maids, and laughed, "We'll show them!"

At twelve-thirty, when he began to shout orders down the lift in the dining-room, Grace had everything ready. Meat and two vegetables—how he disliked that silly abbreviation “veg”!—sweet, biscuits and cheese for eighteen pence. Admittedly he couldn’t run to Stiltons as they did at his mother’s place, the farmers had to be content with the cheaper varieties. Good stuff, but a bit on the raw-tasting side.

He remembered the menu that day. Marvellous memory he had. “Roast beef or boiled mutton with dumplings. Potatoes—roast or boiled. Jam roly-poly or rice and custard. Cheese and biscuits.”

Yes, Grace had risen to the occasion all right. Not a mistake, no delay, every plate hot—everyone satisfied. Old Brewer, from over Rawsey way, had said, “Tha’s gotten a reit cook, Forest, choose how!” He had made them all laugh, by telling them that the cook was tight, lying on her bed, snoring like a pig.

He gave an account of how he and Tom had carried her up to her room. “It was like lifting a feather bed. She’d neither shape or form it seemed.” He continued to recount what his wife had said, “and this dinner you’ve eaten, gentlemen, is what she’s done!”

“An’ varry good an’ all. Yer might know as Dr. Ben ’Arrison’s lass ’ud know how ter set aboot maist things. ’Er muther weer a reit notable ’ousewife Ah’ve ’eard tell.”

They were a success, his farmers’ dinners. Nothing grand, but good sound stuff, giving satisfaction. For himself he loathed being in the dining-room. It was the one day in the week which he hated—Market Day. The rough voices, the smell of sweat and hot food, the odour of cheap tobacco; he detested taking the orders from the waiter and waitress, they both breathed so heavily. Only last week Jane, the idiot, had let a greasy knife slip from her fingers, and make a mark right down his immaculate blue trousers.

He stood now, his hands in his pockets, watching and listening to Grace and the cook discussing the day’s menu. The Ring of Bells did dinners every day, though Market Day was the “peak” of the week.

Grace smiled at him, and went on talking to the cook, a small, wiry woman, with bright sharp eyes.

“That cold mutton can be minced for the nursery dinner—the beef can be served cold—there’s more left than I thought. That steak—it looks good, doesn’t it?”

Cook said, “Aye, it dean’t luke so badly, yon doesn’t.”

"Steak pudding—good for a cold day like this. There won't be more than ten or eleven people to-day. Puddings—well how about rice and stewed apple served with it and—where's that piece of cheese that's gone so dry? They didn't seem to care for this strong, red cheese on Thursday, Freddie. What is it?"

He said, "It's a colonial cheese—sent over from Canada."

"Oh!" her tone implied that she didn't think much of Canada or its cheese. "Make that into welsh rarebits, cook. You might make a few scones with that stale milk, oh, and a cake for James' birthday."

"Aye, 'e mun 'ave a caake, t'little lad must. Ah've promised 'im one. Ah niver like ter disappoint bairns, Ah dean't."

Grace slipped her arm through his, nodded to the cook saying, "Then that's all arranged then. Thank you, cook." Together they went back into the hall, Tom, in his green baize apron, went through the glass panelled front door, letting in a sudden gust of cold air.

Grace called, "Oh, Tom—*shut that door!* Now, I must go and see to the bedrooms. We're doing better with the bedrooms, Freddie. Four people stayed last night—yes, travellers. Going out, darling?"

"Yes, I must." He remembered the plants for Bee Fellows. "Got to."

"Of course. There—I must fly. See you at half past one."

"Right. Tom—get my hat and coat, will you? And my stick."

Tom handed him his hat, helped him on with the heavy Melton cloth overcoat, passed a brush over its fine velvet collar, and presented Fredrick with his walking stick, a handsome affair with a silver band, inscribed and stating that the stick was a present to Fredrick Forest from a few of his friends.

He stepped out into the pleasant old square, and on reaching the further side, turned and stood looking back to survey the Ring of Bells. He never failed to do this, allowing his eyes to travel along the row of windows, noting that blinds and curtains hung with mathematical accuracy. Nothing annoyed Fredrick more than to see the blinds at varying levels. The place looked well, there was no mistake about that, smart and well cared for.

He walked on, consciously squaring his shoulders, swinging his stick, ready to give a smiling, "Good-morning" here, and a more serious and respectful one there. Fredrick believed in paying suitable respect to elderly men, particularly if they were Aldermen or Town Councillors.

In Swaine's he ordered the small ferns for which Bee Fellows had asked. The girl who served him smiled at him, he made a mental note that she had rather good eyes.

"A dozen then, and let them come along as quickly as possible, won't you?"

"Of course, Mr. Forest. I shouldn't wonder if they were there before what you were."

"If they are," he laughed, "I'll bring you a box of chocolates next time I come in. So—do your best."

Not that there was any particular hurry for the plants, Bee Fellows wouldn't put them out until to-morrow morning, but when Fred wanted anything—he wanted it at once. 'Other people may be ready to wait,' he reflected, 'I want prompt attention.' He liked that word—prompt.

As he left the shop he came face to face with Mrs. Matt Walker.

"You're in a great hurry," she exclaimed.

"I *was* in a great hurry," Fred corrected.

She was a tall, rather handsome woman, in the middle thirties. Her clothes were smart and well cut, she demanded attention—and got it. Her fine dark eyes held considerable expression; at the moment they rested with a certain hint of admiration on Fred Forest. Her full red lips parted in a smile.

"Always the right word at the right moment, eh?" she asked.

"There are cases when it is terribly difficult to—find the right word without seeming—what shall I say?—presumptuous."

"Wait until I've ordered some flowers, and we'll walk up the street together."

He nodded, thought that she spoke the words as if they were a command. And why not? A woman as good-looking as Mrs. Matt had a right to give orders. By Jove, what a stunner! He could hear her now, talking to little Joe Swaine, hear Joe's repeated, "Yes, Mrs. Walker—certainly, Mrs. Walker. Fresh this morning, Mrs. Walker." Joe would never get anywhere—he was subservient. Respect was one thing, crawling was another.

"Now!" she stood beside him, and he felt that to walk up Craven Street, through the Market Place, with Mrs. Matt Walker was a feather in his cap. Not that the Walkers were gentry. Old Matt had a mineral water factory, owned a lot of cottage property, and it was said, made a book on all the big races, invariably coming out on the right side. Common old fellow, always wore immense checks and "doggie" caps; his heavy

scarlet face was like a harvest moon. He drank more than was good for him, everyone knew that. People said that she had been a barmaid in the station refreshment room at York when he met her, and that he'd managed to get her a job at the big station hotel at Leeds. Fredrick slid a glance in her direction, thinking, 'And what a damn fine barmaid she must have been too!' Anyway, old Walker had married her, bought the Grange to live in, they spent money very freely, and entertained a good deal.

She said, "Come and dine one evening. You know my husband, don't you? He's not fond of women, or I'd ask your wife, but Matt says that 'wives' depress him. Dreadful fellow, he is! When will you come? Let's see—next week—I shan't be back from Corchester Races until the Thursday. Come on Friday—Friday week, eh? Quite a small party—half-a-dozen of us."

"I shall be delighted—it's most kind. Er—dress clothes?"

"Good Lord, no! Matt would have a fit. By the way, are you doing anything to-day?"

He stared, "I'm on my way back to my little pub."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Get along with you! No! At Clinton. Three o'clock race. I hear that 'Hunter's Moon' is a cert. Price won't shorten much either. You'll get sevens, possibly eights. Keep it to yourself."

At the entrance of the Royal Lion she stopped.

"I'm meeting Matt and Hearvy Cray here. Know Hearvy? Good chap. We're going to sample your mother's sherry. Matt heard that she's done wonders with her cellar. Good-bye. Friday week then, at half-past seven."

For a second Fredrick wondered if he should not go in with her. Then he decided that it would be wiser to leave her. He held her hand for a fraction longer than was necessary, holding his hat in his hand as he did so.

"I can't tell you how delightful this—meeting has been," he said.

She nodded. "Yes—it's so nice in this dull hole to meet a man who is under fifty."

"I'm so glad that I'm not fifty yet."

"You have to go a good many years before you reach fifty. I always think that you look such a boy—particularly to have the amount of responsibility you must have. I must fly."

That phrase 'I always think that you look such a boy' pleased him. Silently he repeated it several times as he walked

home. "I always think——" surely the implication was that she had thought about him—more than once, perhaps many times. Delightful to know that he had been the subject of Mrs. Matt's thoughts.

II

Grace met him in the hall. "Your mother's here, Fred. She's up in the nursery talking to the children. She thinks that Gladys looks so well, and that Francis is quite a lot fatter."

"Does she want me?"

"Yes, she'll stay and have dinner with us."

"Right. I'll come up."

Miss Fellows called, "Thanks for the plants, Mr. Forest."

As he ran up the stairs, Fred called back, "Oh, they've sent them, have they? That's good."

Grace said as they reached the landing, "That girl's getting far too familiar, Fred, calling out to you like that. 'Thanks for the plants!' Positively impertinent!"

He frowned, suddenly irritated. If Grace were going to get at cross purposes with Miss Fellows how tiresome it would be!

"My dear, don't be touchy," he said. "The girl didn't mean any disrespect. It's just her manner."

His wife's lips looked hard. "Then the sooner she alters her manner when she speaks to her employer, the better."

Fred breathed, "O Lord!"

His mother was sitting near the window when they entered. She held out her hand, in its tight kid glove, saying, "Well, my dear—how are you?"

He kissed her, then sat down near her. "This is pleasant, Mama. Come to see how badly our simple food compares with the rich dishes of the Royal Lion?"

"I'm certain that what you give is very good, Fred. Grace here's been telling me what you've on to-day. I'm a great believer in a good cold joint. But I want to try this steak pudding. Oh, Fred, I should change that barmaid of yours. Her manners are far too free—flouncing about, tossing her head at old Walter Brewer. I'd like to see any of my girls behaving like that. They'd only do it once."

He flushed. "As a matter of fact, Mama, she's a very capable girl; honest, and hard-working."

His mother tapped his arm with her gloved finger. "Fred, I never like sentences that begin with—'as a matter of fact.' She may be all you say, but she'd not suit me, she's bad style."

Common, and—say what you like—flighty. Ah—here's this famous pudding!" She smiled at Grace, said, "Good-morning" to the maid who carried in the food, and carefully removed her tight gloves. She disregarded her son's flushed and angry face, and spoke with a kind of determined good nature. She praised the food, asked questions as to the numbers of dinners served every day, and admitted that the Ring of Bells looked admirably kept, and spotlessly clean.

"When we've finished this very good food," she said, "I want to have a talk with you about your cellar. I don't know if you've heard that I'm embarking on a very big change. Specialising in wines."

"I heard something about it." He was still smarting under the criticism of Bee Fellows. He'd show them that he got news before it was handed out to him, probably days late. "Mrs. Matt Walker told me that she was going into your place to sample some of your sherry. Matt Walker was there with Hearvey Cray. She joined them there."

Grace said, "What—she was going to drink sherry with two men in the morning! Well, really!"

Fred scowled. "Don't be so old-fashioned, Grace! It's not a crime to drink sherry in the morning, is it?"

"The less I see of Matt Walker in the Royal Lion the better I shall be pleased," Elizabeth said. "I've known him, and known of him for more years than you've been alive, Fred. However—things are changing, and women seem to me to be doing a great many things they didn't do in my time. Yes, I thought of starting you off with a small stock of wine—good stuff. Clarets, sherries, port and so forth."

"Scarcely worth while," Fred said; he lolled back in his chair, assumed an attitude which was at once careless and superior. "I don't do much of that sort of trade. Our strong suit is spirits." His mother might think that she knew everything, he was going to show her that he wouldn't stand being dictated to—about his staff or his stock.

She refused to be disturbed. Fred was in "one of his moods," he was going to be awkward, and bring forward all kinds of objections. She sat there, calmly, eating rice pudding and stewed apples, turning to speak to Grace. A good girl; she'd done very well by Fred and Fred's business.

"Well, there's no harm in having a look at your cellar, Fred. I don't propose that you should carry such a great deal. Just—as you might say—a selection of what I have at the Lion."

He still lounged in his chair. "Since when did you become a judge of wines, Mama?"

She smiled. "Well, it's a long story. It began with an argument, and lost tempers, and it ended with—with what I hope may be a good friendship. Sir Edward Bower was lunching with his wife. She's Coster's—and she's guiding my footsteps as you might say."

"Mother—Lady Bower—fancy!" Grace showed her astonishment.

This was an opportunity too good to be missed. Fred laughed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I must say that I don't understand you, Mama. You're down on Mrs. Walker because she has a glass of sherry with her husband, but you're very set up with Lady Bower, who's known to swear like a trooper, smoke in public, and can drink—so I hear—brandy by the bottleful. Bit unfair, it seems to me. I shouldn't care for my wife to hob-nob with Lady Bower."

"Fred," Elizabeth said quietly, "listen to me. You'll find out in life that what one person can do—another can't. I can't tell you why that is, but it's true. There are many things that Lady Bower could do, does do—I don't doubt—that would be all wrong if I did them. Maybe it's a question of—bigness. I don't mean tallness, I mean—character. She had luncheon with me a time back, and as we sat there talking afterwards, I thought, 'I don't care what you do, I don't care what folks say about you, you're good.' She's as straight as string, and as sweet as a nut. Your dear father would have liked her, that I do know, my son. And now," rising, "thank you for a very nice meal, Grace, give my love to the dear children, and I'll come down with you and have a look at your cellar, Fred."

That evening Grace said to her husband, "Your mother's different, isn't she, Fred? Relies more on herself; she's—well, she's firmer, isn't she?"

Fred, carefully tree-ing his immaculate boots, replied, "Firmer! My mother is changing into a damned obstinate woman, I can tell you that. Lady Bower and her confounded wines! Believe me, if Lady Bower comes here she'll be put in her place, very firmly—and by me."



CHAPTER VII

FREDRICK

GRACE said, "You're very smart to-night."

Fredrick smiled. He had taken considerable pains with his dressing, and felt that the jacket with the new-fashioned long lapels suited him. They gave him length, and took away from the slight heaviness of his body and shoulders. He pulled the front of the jacket so that it fell correctly.

"Not a bad suit," he admitted. "Say what you like, it pays to go to a decent tailor. I shan't be in to supper. I'm dining out at the Walkers'. Just a men's dinner. No ladies invited."

Grace stared at him. "I didn't know that you were so friendly with Matt Walker."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh—friendly—I'd scarcely call it that. An acquaintance, nothing more." He laughed. "In all probability they were short of a man and so—asked me. I don't flatter myself."

"I hope you enjoy yourself. Will you be late?"

He fancied that her tone was cold, holding a faint hint of disapproval. He replied with considerable heartiness.

"Late, rather not! I don't want to sit and listen to Walker's stories until all hours. No, no, I shall be back early."

He walked briskly to the Grange, a large, gloomy house, surrounded by a high stone wall, which encircled a dank-looking garden where nothing except laurels and privet seemed to grow. All the same, he decided, it was a fine house, it looked well run and comfortable. The brass on the front door shone brilliantly, the hall to which he was admitted was spacious, there were some dark, over-varnished oil paintings hanging on the walls in fine gilt frames. The carpet was thick and soft under his feet. He was ushered into a brightly-lit room, which gave the impression of being furnished with a good deal of gilt furniture. The maid said, "The mistress will be down in a minute if you'd be so kind as to wait. There's cigarettes on that table there and will you take anything to drink?" Cigarettes in a drawing-room! As long as he could remember he had believed that no one smoked in these rooms which were set aside for—the ladies. Even at the Lion, in the public drawing-room, there was a notice on the door forbidding smoking.

"Not at the moment," Fredrick said. He wasn't sure what to order if he had a drink and disliked making mistakes.

Alone, he stared round the room. He admired the wall-paper with its wide watered silk stripes, the water-colour paintings in their bright gilt frames, the glass-fronted cabinet filled with bright china. Matt Walker must have plenty of money to fling about.

The door opened, Mrs. Walker entered, holding out her hand, crying: "So sorry I'm late. I'm always late. And you're my special guest for the evening so I ask your pardon. I had to have someone to 'leaven the lump' of Matt's friends. They're all in the smoking-room drinking sherry—shall we join them or have a cocktail here? D'you like cocktails? They're quite a new idea—American, y'know. Sheer poison, but marvellous."

He said, "If it's permissible—a cocktail here, with you."

She opened a very elegant cupboard and let down a sliding shelf, preparing to select various bottles. The whole thing was businesslike and effective. She turned, holding out a glass filled with amber-coloured liquid.

Fredrick peered into the glass. "And what is this?"

"Dry Martini—oh, the little green thing is an olive. Try it."

He sipped. "Delicious—and extraordinary."

"Cigarette? So will I."

He lit her cigarette, thought how dashing she looked, how well groomed how—expensive. Her dress was elaborate, heavily trimmed with coarse lace, the skirt fell round her feet in ample folds; her hair was wonderfully dressed, piled in masses of curls and stuck with two diamond pins.

"Like my dress?" she asked.

"I could never find words to say how much, and—may I say it?—how wonderful your hair looks."

She laughed softly, he felt that the sound held a certain satisfaction, as if she felt that their conversation was progressing and developing smoothly and according to plan. A woman of the world! Well, he wasn't behind the door when worldly wisdom was shared out. He knew how many beans made five, and how to treat handsome women.

"I spent two hours having it done. I felt they were wasted, until this moment. Matt would never notice if I had my head tied up in a duster. I must say I like men to notice when you've taken pains with clothes and all the rest of it."

He allowed his voice to assume a graver tone. "I always believe in saying—'Thank you' for what is beautiful."

"You're an adept at saying the right thing, Mr. Forest. So unlike the collection of yobs one meets in this benighted hole. Take those two friends of yours—oh, they're nice enough—yes, Wrench and Small. But they can only sit and gape at me, they never say anything—that matters."

Feeling that he was loyally defending Wrench and Small, he said: "Some of us are dumb when faced with so much beauty. It may be a case of 'Fain would I climb but that I fear to fall'."

"That a quotation? Oh, believe me, no woman cares tuppence for that moony kind of attitude. If a man admires me, or my clothes, then for Heaven's sake why can't he say so?"

Fredrick laughed. "Then that gives me permission to sing your praises whenever we meet. A thousand thanks."

Somewhere a gong boomed, the sound swelling until Fredrick felt that his ear drums would burst. Mrs. Walker seemed unaffected by the din, merely finishing her cocktail and saying, "Dinner at last."

In the hall they were engulfed by a wave of loud-voiced men, and Fredrick heard old Matt Walker's bellow of "Hello, Forest, how's your ma?" above the noise. The dining-room was like the drawing-room; rich, heavy and self-conscious. Fredrick had never seen so much carved furniture gathered into one room before. The air was filled with the scent of cooked food.

Mrs. Walker said: "Here, on my left, Mr. Forest, please. Hearvey, on this side. Miles—there, 'Cheffy' next to Miles—that's right, Ben, and you next to Matt, Beman."

"Cheffy," a little foxy-faced fellow, said, "Want me to say grace, Mrs. Matt?"

Matt Walker bellowed, "You can if you know one—which Ah varry mooch doubt!"

They talked of racing, mentioned names of men and horses which conveyed nothing to Fredrick, and while they talked they ate and drank. He had never seen men eat so fast, and rarely heard people eat so noisily. Thick heavy soup, turbot, great slices of roast beef and hunks of Yorkshire pudding, rich gravy, mountains of vegetables, enormous slices of apple pie, with great wedges of cheese, pitchers of cream so thick that it would scarcely run out of the jug which held it. All the time the bawling conversation. "Ah allus said he couldn't win—no staying power." . . . "Nay, if you ask me the race was won afore the horses started." . . . "Better not let 'Chuck' Milton hear you say that, lad!" . . . "Bit mower of that beef, Mary, aye an' pudden an' all." . . . "Yon horse owes me a bit of brass, I'll

tell you." . . . "Anuther whisky and soda here, Ellen, fur Mr. Cray. Nay, it 'ul not hurt you!" . . . "That's right, Vane o' Vane Conyers has bought her." . . . "Ovver light, all style and nowt ter back it. Ah hate these flashy mares like hell."

Once or twice Fredrick caught Mrs. Walker's eyes, their expression half amusement, half boredom, as if she said, 'This is always what happens. Horses, horses, horses. So boring.'

"Did you back 'Hunter's Moon'?" she asked during one of the rare lulls in the bawling.

"Of course—I got eight to one. I felt that it was a command when you told me to back it."

Walker shouted, "Who telt who ter back what?"

"Mrs. Walker told me to back 'Hunter's Moon,' sir."

"Then Mrs. Walker had no damned right to. That's the reason the blasted price shortened, through her telling every Tom, Dick an' Harry. Wish you'd keep your mouth shut, Isobel."

"Get along, Matt," she returned. "The price only shortened to sevens, and you'd put your money on days before and got tens. What have you to grumble at?"

The man called Beman, lantern-jawed and sandy, said, "Much on it?"

"Two pounds."

"Each way?"

Fredrick flushed, he had never backed horses, his father had disapproved of gambling in any form, and forbidden it. He had no idea what "each way" meant. He felt that they were all staring at him, their flushed and shining faces turned enquiringly towards him, their hard eyes fixed on his scarlet face.

Miles said, "Damn it, I don't believe he knows what it means!"

"Don't yer?" Walker demanded.

Fredrick flung back his head, better to face it out with an air. "No, sir. Frankly I don't."

How they roared. They lay back in their chairs, they rolled from side to side, they mopped their eyes with table napkins, hiccoughed and spluttered. As the storm of laughter died, Hearvey Cray said: "Let me tell him. Here's valuable advice, young feller. Each way means that you back it—to win or to lose. See?"

Again the laughter broke out, it was like a hurricane sweeping through the room. For an instant Fredrick wished that he might leap to his feet and rush out, leaving them to their amusement, then he felt a gentle pressure against his knee, soft fingers,

reassuring and sympathetic. Looking up he met Isobel Walker's eyes, saw her smile kindly and understanding. He recovered his temper.

"I won't forget, sir," he said to Cray. "Only tell me—what happens if it wins and loses?"

Walker said, "B'God, he's not so green as we thought. Now, answer that, Hearvey. He's pulling your leg now."

Once again, as the long dinner drew to a close, he felt Mrs. Walker's foot touch his, knew that his heart beat faster, that his excitement grew. When she rose, saying that she would have hot punch ready for them at ten, he sprang to open the door. As she passed out, she said softly, "Don't be too long. If you're bored come and talk to me."

He went back to his chair, feeling reassured.

They were arguing again, some long discussion about drinking brandy after whisky and soda.

Miles said, "Let's have your opinion, Forest. You keep a pub, don't you? What about brandy after whisky and soda, eh?"

Speaking easily, leaning back in his chair, Fredrick said, "Possibly one might manage it—probably not. I should resent any guest of mine doing it. My brandy is too good to be insulted. I hope that the brandy would resent it as much as I should."

He knew that his tone had impressed them. They might shout and yell with laughing at his discomfiture, but they were a stupid lot, he reflected. A hint of superiority and they looked at you with respect. He'd teach this fellow Miles to ask if he "kept a pub!"

Walker nodded. "He knows what he's talking about. His ma has some grand stuff. Sampled some the other day, didn't we, Hearvey? It weer grand! She's a remarkable laady is yer ma, Forest. Telled me that Claudia Bower weer a friend o' hers."

"That old Teddie Bower's missus?" Beman asked. "Bit go-ey, bi all accounts, eh?"

"T' grey mare, bi what I hear. She wears t'breeches."

Miles declared, "I'll bet they suit her an' all. Niver saw a finer leg i' me life!"

Matt Walker rumbled, "Nay, they saay aut, they saay as my missus rules t'roost here, they saay as she wears t'breeches. Why, soa long as she keeps 'em hidden from other chaps, an' only let's me get a luke at 'em—what the hell do Ah care? Not a tinker's damn."

"Cheffy" poured out another glass of port. Fredrick wondered what they would all feel like in the morning. Sherry,

whiskies, brandies, and now port—the lot to be topped with hot punch at ten.

"Cheffy" said, "I heard a good one t'other day at Doncaster."

"Let's have it!"

Stories, all of them bawdy, the majority lacking either taste or humour. Each man waiting, with the alert expression of a greyhound waiting to be slipped, for another's story to end so that he might tell his own particular favourite. They were deeply engrossed in one which necessitated the use of matches for its demonstration, and Fredrick slipped quietly from his chair, and made his way to the drawing-room.

Isobel Walker greeted him. "Bored stiff, eh?"

"Oh, scarcely—but the magnet was too strong for me."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning—you. How kind you were during dinner, and what a fool I made of myself! I'm terribly grateful, indeed I am."

"That was nothing. You see here the only book that is read with any interest is *Ruff's Guide*. I ought to have warned you. You must come and dine with me one night when Matt's away. Or—would your wife object?"

"Why should she?"

Her eyes shone with amusement. "There might be a variety of reasons. Depends upon how conventional you are, how circumspect."

"I can't answer—I don't know. I have never faced—what I am facing now."

Again she smiled. "Once more," she said, "meaning me?"

"You, and what you stand for to me."

"I'm not going to ask what all that means. Not now at any rate. I'll tell you this, Freddie—d'you mind being called Freddie?—I like fun, I like a good time. I'm a good pal, and I don't tell tales out of school. Matt's a good chap, but he takes his fun where he finds it, and why shouldn't I? I don't ask questions, neither does he."

He took a step forward, his intention was obvious, and she only continued to smile at him. He decided to take a chance, and catching her in his arms he kissed her on her full, scarlet lips. When he let her go, he stood watching her, ready to meet any protest. None came, she laughed softly.

"You don't lose any time, do you?" she said.

"Why should I go thirsty?"

"Thirst gone now?"

"No, it's grown worse."

They both laughed, and again he caught her to him and kissed her.

II

The dawn of a Century. Everyone argued about which was the real date, was it the end of 1899, or the beginning of 1900? Some people even said that the century didn't really begin until 1901. Fredrick smiled. Surprising what a lot of rubbish people talked, and grew serious over. As if it mattered! There were changes, would be more. He'd seen enough in his time.

Not a bad record of adventures for a man only just past thirty. He hadn't come out of it badly on the whole. No mistaking it. A man who was full blooded, and who possessed more than the average amount of attraction couldn't help having adventures. He attracted women, and women—his smile widened—attracted him.

1897, that had been his first serious affair. Or had it been so serious after all? Mrs. Matt Walker—Isobel. A damned handsome woman too. No nonsense about her, knew what she wanted, knew what a man wanted. For over a year he had been crazy about her. A day wasn't a day if he didn't see her. Even now Fredrick wasn't sure how much Grace had known or guessed. She'd never said anything, but she had been different. Then old Matt had died after a seizure in 1898, very suddenly. Just fallen down outside the Royal Lion, and been dead in an hour. He left £24,000, every penny of it to his wife. In three months she married Hearvey Cray, and went to live at Brighton. He'd never heard from her, never really wanted to.

There had been that unpleasant interview with Cray, when he called at the Grange, and Cray walked into the morning-room, where he was waiting, in that room which had been the scene of so many of his meetings with Isobel. Cray, his hands in his pockets, looked offensive.

"What-cher want?" he asked.

"I called to see Mrs. Walker."

"You did, did you? Well, in a very few days Mrs. Walker"—he had mimicked Fredrick's tone—" 'ul be Mrs. Hearvey Cray, and you can b—— off, here and now. I'm not blind, I've eyes and I use 'em. Belle's had her head, she's kicked up her heels, and now she'll see how she likes being ridden on the damn curb. Shall I show you the door or can you find it yourself?"

Fredrick said, "Don't you think that you're being damned offensive?"

"I don't doubt it. Belle's going to marry me. She's a rich woman, but I'm a richer man, and never mind what poor old Matt put up with, I don't. I shan't talk, see that you don't. That's all."

He had walked away from the big, gloomy house smarting with annoyance. There hadn't been any sense of loss, no grief, only annoyance. Well, he sighed contentedly, he hoped that she was happy.

Then suddenly Grace turned difficult, and said that Bee Fellows must go. He asked why. Grace said for reasons which she was certain he could appreciate, and go she must and should. Or, Grace said, she would go back to her father, Dr. Ben Harrison. Fredrick had asked what was wrong with Bee Fellows, she gave satisfaction, she worked hard, but Grace had been obdurate.

"She may give satisfaction—but not to me. She may work hard, but it's not work I care for. Either she goes or I do, Fredrick."

Bee had gone, tossing her head and saying that she'd been going anyway, she was going to marry a commercial traveller and live in Leeds. Another barmaid had come, and gone. Now they had a cold, handsome piece of goods, and half the men in the place were mad about her. She never looked at any of them.

Grace said, "Miss Mallison is a very *fine* girl. She's engaged to a sailor and he won't be home for three years. Even then they won't have enough to marry on. I *respect* Miss Mallison."

Then the War had started, and he and Wrench and George Small had joined the Yeomanry. Young Lord Frensham, Swathford's son, Sir Gervase Vane's eldest boy, Maurice, and Francis Mellor had been in the same troop. What a dinner his mother had given at the Royal Lion for them! Gladys, not quite seven then, had been allowed to recite "The Absent-Minded Beggar," standing on a little table covered with a Union Jack.

Wrench had whispered, "Wonder if she knows what it's all about?"

Small giggled and answered, "Not the line—'He's left a lot of little things behind him'."

They'd got an old general to make a speech, and the brandy of the Royal Lion had been too much for him. His aide had put a pile of notes in front of him, and the old boy had argued, everyone could hear him.

"Not come here to maksh a spcheech—do' know warrer say. Damn makin' spcheech!"

Then when they got him on his feet, dripping with medals, he swung backwards and forwards with a glass of brandy in his hand and said, "Genn'lemen—The Queel!" and sat down again.

A grand night! It had all been grand. Going out, every trooper in their lot taking his own horse—splendid horses too. There had been some lovely women on board, society women. He had his usual success! How she had cried when they got to Cape Town and he had to leave her. Lady Mercia Faringay. They had all said the same to their women: "I'll bring you back Kruger's whiskers!"

Not such fun when it came to the fighting though. "Brother Boer" was a wily devil, clever as paint. Never knew where you had him. Poor George Small went out with a bullet through his skull, and so did young Frensham, and Maurice Vane died of enteric. Fredrick nearly followed his example, but pulled round, and came home looking like a ghost. Marvellous nurse he had in Cape Town! Phyllis—what? The name had gone. An angel—he chuckled—but not too much of one. Grace had cried when she first saw him. "Oh, Fred, what have those devils done to you? My darling, thank God you're home again." His mother too: "Fredrick—oh, this is what war does!" Percy had stared at him, and said, "Thank God, I never felt any impulse to go out." Young Martin—strange lad Martin, with that pale face, and thick dark hair which fell in a heavy lock over his forehead—had stared at him, saying nothing. Martin always made him feel uncomfortable somehow.

That was all over, an experience he wouldn't have missed for worlds. Grand to have been a man among men, fighting England's foes, and shedding your blood for her—the Motherland. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. Thoughts of the Boer War always affected him. He wasn't ashamed either.

And now—1900. He was thirty-one, had a son of nine. They had asked him to go on the City Council, but he had refused.

"While I am appreciative of the honour which you have done me, gentlemen, I know where I am most useful. I am the keeper of an old-fashioned inn." They'd laughed at that, for everyone knew that he had made the Ring o' Bells as up-to-date as any hotel within a fifty mile radius. "I am content to do my duty in that state of life to which it has pleased fate and the licensing justices to call me." Another laugh, and because he was quoting from the Catechism, they had applauded his daring.

He had stuck to his inn-keeping. How different the place was from when he had taken it over in '97! Seven bathrooms, the children no longer living there, but sent out to the farm at Clutteringly, which his mother had bought, so that the Royal Lion and the Ring o' Bells could offer the best butter, really new laid eggs, home fed poultry and special fruit to their guests. The Ring o' Bells wasn't the Royal Lion of course. Fredrick didn't want it to be. Let his mother get the county, the visiting personalities, even now and again a lesser member of the Royal Family. Let her specialise in wines, in old spirits, in choice cigars, in food which grew more and more elaborate with each year. He was content to keep a smart, up-to-date house. No more farmers' dinners for him. They went to the Crown—and even the Crown belonged to Elizabeth Forest and had done for the past two years. He did a business which catered for the smart commercial traveller, the man with money to spend, and a desire to spend it. The brighter young men of the town always "dropped" into Fred Forest's, while their fathers dined soberly at the Lion. His private bar was always crowded, and slowly, and carefully he had introduced—cocktails. How well he remembered the first he had ever tasted—a Dry Martini. A tame kind of cocktail! Money—plenty of that, even allowing for the improvements which he was always making. Of course he wasn't working absolutely independently of his mother, there were certain matters which he always referred to her, on which he asked her advice, but he was virtually his own master. And her country hotels! How they paid. She had acquired more, he had forgotten exactly how many there were now—fifteen or more. She had begun to advertise, with care, and without ostentation.

People were talking about motor cars as practical propositions. By next year he would have one. Smart, claret-coloured, with a driver in livery. He stretched out his hand for the decanter, and poured out another glass of port. While Grace and the children were at the farm he dined alone in some state. He had grown used to ordering small delicacies for himself. Standing staring at the fishmonger's slab, he would beckon to young Downing, and ask if there was anything "special." A few oysters, a quail, a particularly good sole, anything which took his fancy. The same at the fruiterer's. Some fine grapes with plenty of bloom on them, a few peaches, some nectarines—to round off his meal. Not that he ate a great deal, but what he had must be good. And recently he had discovered the beauty of good wine. Not

that he ever drank too much, in business he had to keep his head clear.

He enjoyed dining alone. The shimmer of good glass, the shining smoothness of damask, the well polished silver, and the fine china. Sometimes he would ask one or two friends to dine with him, and he had heard with a sense of satisfaction that "Fred Forest's dinners are worth going to."

He sat there sipping his wine, well-dressed, with rather large, well-kept hands, and hair which shone with careful brushing. His face had grown a little heavy, the wide shoulders faintly clumsy, but Fred Forest at thirty-one was handsome—more, he was successful.

'I'll slip out to the farm to-morrow,' he decided. 'I've not been there for five days. Longing to see Grace and my children. Still—if you're in business you have to make sacrifices. I make my sacrifices for Grace and the children. God bless them!'

The maid entered with the coffee, he smiled and nodded.

"Put it on this small table. You're new, aren't you? I thought so. Ah, you come from York. A lovely city! I hope you will be very happy here. Very happy."

He laid his hand for a second on her arm, a gesture which was so nearly fatherly that it was impossible to resent it.

"Thank you, sir. Ah hope so, Ah'm sure."

A pretty girl—with a good skin.

"There are some chocolates in that box over there. Help yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

He watched her, she moved well. Her hands were not clumsy. How he hated clumsy women.

"No, no—take more than one. Sweets are good for growing girls."

CHAPTER VIII

FREDRICK

ELIZABETH FOREST sat with folded hands listening to her eldest son. She had grown stouter, and in spite of all her hard work—and no woman worked harder—her face was tranquil. Claudia Bower said that she had assumed that expression of calm in order to prevent other people knowing what she was thinking. Elizabeth never denied it, she only smiled and changed the subject.

She had attained a position which was unique, and she knew it. At fifty-two she was the owner—either part or whole—of fifteen hotels. In each one her word was law. To be allowed to invest money in Elizabeth Forest's concerns was regarded as not only highly remunerative, but as something of a distinction.

Her attitude was high-handed. She would allow no one to hold shares who were purely commercial investors. Shareholders were all men of substance, men who could appreciate that they were shareholders in hotels which were run on distinctive lines. There was never any question of the shares being on the open market. Lawyer Swan arranged everything, such shares as were for sale were bought back automatically by Mrs. Forest. Edward Bower, his huge scarlet face beaming with amusement, said that Mrs. Forest was an autocrat.

"I never deny it," she returned. "I knew what I wanted when I began, after my dear husband left me, and I have never altered my policy."

"Never hankered after a really big hotel?"

"Never! I want first-rate small places, I should be lost in a huge place. It wouldn't be suited to my style of custom. Too impersonal and detached."

"But there's big money in those immense places, surely, m'dear."

"I never said that I wanted big money, Sir Edward. My dear husband always said that ideas without ideals were dangerous. I have tried to have both. My customers don't come to stare at flighty barmaids, they don't come to drink those abominations—cocktails. They want comfort and dignity—and"—she smiled—"I see that they get both." Now, here was Fredrick trying to persuade her to give way on the matter of a really big hotel. Fredrick who had his arguments at his finger tips, who sat opposite to her, looking so handsome, so efficient, speaking so plausibly.

Leaning against the wide marble mantelpiece stood her second son, Percy. Not good-looking like Fredrick, but hard-working and reliable. His clothes were never possessed of the elegance which characterised his elder brother's; he would wear a necktie until it was so shabby that his mother protested. Even then she had to buy a new one for him, or he would put off doing so from day to day. She remembered the day when she had crept into his room and taken away his old string tie, leaving a new one in its place. The next morning she said, "Now that's a nice tie, Percy!" and he replied, "Yes, I've always liked this tie."

His whole heart was in his work. To him figures were entrancing, and he welcomed the necessity for a balance sheet. Oh, a good boy, dear Percy!

As Fredrick spoke she instinctively turned her eyes to where her youngest boy, Martin, sat. How thin he was, dear child. Twenty years old and already his tutors and the authorities at the university predicted a brilliant career for him. He wanted to be a clergyman. He had never wavered from that determination. She had mentioned his ambition to Sir Thomas Illing, who was interested.

"Fine career, the Church," he said, "for a man with brains and education. Must have both to make a success of it. Tell you what I'll do, Mrs. Forest. The living of Rawlton is in my gift. My poor old cousin, Gerald—used to be a first-rate shot, and what a horseman!—is getting old. Gout's got him in its clutches. Oh he has a couple of curates—they come and go, y'know, come and go. Poor lot on the whole. Gerald'ul last quite a time yet, another seven or eight years Thirk tells me, with care. He can keep the living warm for your boy, eh? Pleasant house, good stabling, generous stipend, and tithes. Like the idea?"

She had said, "That is most generous of you, Sir Thomas. Most generous. I shall tell Martin. He will be delighted and as grateful as I am."

She forced her thoughts back to Fredrick.

"... a first-rate place. One of the best in the North. Sun-chester is growing, factories opening, the chances are obvious."

"But," Elizabeth objected, "the Majestic is not my type of hotel. Anyway, Fredrick, I dislike working with borrowed money, and look at the price they'd ask for a place of that kind! I should be crippled for years."

"The brewers would come in."

"No, no, I'll have nothing to do with tied houses. They'd tie me, and I dislike not being my own master."

Fred leant forward and said to Percy, "Sure that door's shut, Percy? I don't want this overheard. Callon, who has the Majestic, is in low water. His father built the place, and for a time it paid well, still does up to a point. Callon's handicapped by an ailing wife, I hear she has consumption. He wants to get her away somewhere milder. He's head over ears in debt. Gambling, cards and horses, anything that he can gamble on. Drinks too. Now," his voice held unconcealed triumph, "I happen to know that he's been playing the fool with some girl. She's married, and the husband wants a thundering big

sum to keep his mouth shut and not make a case about it. Never mind how I found all this out, I was in Sunchester last week, and I kept my eyes and ears open."

Martin, speaking for the first time, said, "Ugh! It makes one feel slightly sick!"

Fredrick scowled suddenly, "That's all the thanks I get!"

Percy said, "Go on, Fred, finish your story."

"Now, in the course of the next two years the London trains are going to run direct to Sunchester, without that tiresome change at Brishall. The railway company are going to build works at Sunchester; that's where they are going to make all their new style railway carriages. In addition, Carter and Fosdyke are opening a new factory there—textiles, and Miller and Banks a mill for making woven wool underwear. Sunchester is in for a boom, let me tell you."

Martin said, "If Callon knows all this why doesn't he hang on?"

"Callon, my lad, doesn't know, and Callon isn't going to know. If we want to take advantage of the knowledge I've gained"—he chuckled—"and gained with considerable difficulty, and at considerable expense, we've got to move quickly. All done by making friends, and knowing when to buy that extra drink. An engineer there, a draughtsman here—and," his smile widened, "other ways."

Martin said suddenly and explosively, "I don't like it! It's—it's beneath us."

Fredrick leant back and shrugged his shoulders. "I forgot that we have a budding parson with us. You're not in the business, Martin. You know nothing about it, stick to your Bible-punching."

"Fredrick, I won't allow you to speak in that way to Martin," Elizabeth warned. "I agree with him, that there is a great deal against this idea. I don't want to tie up capital. The place might pay or it might not. I dislike taking advantage of a man's misfortune."

Fredrick twisted in his chair, his fingers drummed on the arms, his face lost all its excitement and became heavy and sullen. He looked like a child who resents criticism. Percy, watching him, thought that Fred was both eating and drinking too much. Fred did everything too much. Tales had filtered through to Percy about various women, tales which were not too savoury, and which, while they might be a tribute to Fred's vitality, were detrimental in every other way. All the same Fred was pretty good at business, he made people like him, wherever he went he

made friends. True those friends might not be the type which appealed to Percy, and they would most certainly not appeal to Martin, but they were useful, and Fred had the ability to use them and to pick their brains.

Percy said, "Well, we can't decide in a minute. It might be worth thinking about, Mama."

"The more I thought about it," Elizabeth said, "the less I should like it. It's not my line of business."

Fredrick stood up, hands deep in his admirably cut trousers, he still scowled, his face was scarlet with annoyance.

"Very well then, Mama, I shall raise the capital and put the thing through on my own. You can find someone else for the Ring of Bells, I can live as well in Sunchester as I can here. I'm perfectly capable of putting this through. Plenty of people have confidence in me, if you haven't. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

His mother stared at him. "Fredrick—you don't mean that!"

"Indeed I do, Mama."

"But—it's impossible."

"I'll show you that it isn't!"

"We can't split up the family in this way."

"Then the family—for what it's worth—must stand by the members of that family"; his tone was slightly pompous. "I'm a business man and I refuse to fling away opportunities."

She was shaken and he knew it. He knew that she hated the idea of his striking out on his own. She was an autocrat; sufficiently kindly, no doubt, but an autocrat all the same. She wanted to be the head of the business, to hold the reins in her hands, and to be accepted as the final court of appeal in everything. She was obstinate—well, he would show her that he could be as obstinate as she was. He stood watching her white, strained face, saw her eyes fill with tears, and heard her voice tremble a little when she spoke.

"If only your beloved father were here! You would never have dared to argue with him, Fredrick."

"If my father were here," Fredrick returned, "he would refuse to allow this chance to be flung away, flung away for the sake of a stupid quibble about what is, or is not the kind of hotel we touch. You can't run a business on those lines. You can't limit yourself to this or that kind of hotel. There is only one condition; is it a paying concern or not?"

Almost wildly she said, "You must give me time. I cannot come to a decision in five minutes. It's impossible."

He pulled out his gold watch. "I'll be back at six. That's two hours. If you have not decided by that time to come in on this, then I make my own arrangements."

He walked out, closing the door firmly behind him. Elizabeth turned to her second son.

"Percy—advise me please. This is dreadful. I don't want this hotel. On the other hand I cannot allow Fredrick to embark on such a project alone. Fredrick is clever, he has done very well with the Ring of Bells, but he doesn't realise that I have always been behind him. He doesn't realise either that the Majestic with—probably—two hundred bedrooms is a different proposition to the Ring of Bells with a bare twenty."

Percy said, "That's true. Fred's good enough, but Fred couldn't get on without you, any more than he could get along without me. There's another thing. The Forest Hotels mean—Elizabeth Forest. Always have done, always will. Fred's Elizabeth Forest's son. But with all his popularity he'll never take your place. I tell you this, Mama, if Fred takes this on his own he'll land in queer street. More, it 'ul be bad for your prestige. Forest Hotels want your name on the notepaper, the justices want to licence your nominee. Even if the licence isn't actually held in your name, they want to know that you're behind the whole thing."

Martin did not speak, he sat there listening intently, his face grave and attentive. He had hated to hear Fred congratulating himself on what seemed to Martin very like a series of deceits and sharp practices. Of the actual business side Martin knew nothing. He had come to his own decision months ago, and knew that with each year he would become further and further removed from the Forest enterprises. He could almost find it in his heart to congratulate Fred on telling him to "stick to your Bible-punching." That was what he would do. He might dislike Fred's attitude towards business, he might resent his behaviour to his mother, but since he had no real part in it all, since he never intended to have any, he had no right to enter into the discussion.

Elizabeth sighed. "I shall buy it. I don't pretend that I like it, that I look forward to it as an addition to my hotels, but I won't have Fredrick make a mess of his life, and I won't have the dignity of my hotels lowered."

Percy walked to where she sat, laid his hand on her shoulder, and said: "I think you're right. You'll make a success of it, I'm certain of that. You always have done, you always will. You know that I'll do all I can, Mama. There, I must be off.

I've some figures to get ready for the morning. Eh, you're a grand plucked 'un!"

She caught his hand in hers. "My dear good son!"

Left alone with Martin, she sighed again. She hated the idea of this new step, but she hated still more that Fredrick should break away from her, should contemplate splitting the family concern.

"Of course," she said to Martin, "Fredrick is very clever. We've got to remember that. Ah, well, I expect that it will be all right. Now, let's talk about other things. That reminds me, Martin, I've some good news for you. I was talking to Sir Thomas Illing the other day, about you. He was very interested."

Martin smiled. His smile was singularly sweet, Elizabeth thought. He wasn't really good-looking, like Fredrick, but he had what she called "an interesting face." Fine, intelligent eyes, a wide, humorous mouth, a nose which might be a little too long, but which had finely carved nostrils, and which held no trace of weakness.

"I'm honoured," he said. "I don't quite see why I should interest Sir Thomas though."

With some excitement she told him of Sir Thomas' promise, talked of the fine house, the excellent stipend attached to the living of Rawlton. Martin listened, his smile died, and when her story came to an end his face was very grave.

"So that's wonderful, isn't it, Martin?" Elizabeth concluded.

"Mama, this is your unlucky day," Martin said with real regret in his voice, "first this bother about the Majestic and now—I'm going to disappoint you, I'm afraid."

"My dear, what is it? Don't you want to enter the Church after all, Martin?"

"I do, I want it more than anything. It's the only thing I do want. Only, Mama dear, it's not your Church, or Sir Thomas Illing's. Oh, it was at first, but—that's over. I haven't come to this decision without a lot of thought, I tried hard—at first—to fight against it. I did fight against it for a long time. That's over. Mama, I want to enter the Catholic Church, to be a priest, if I'm capable of being one."

His mother stared at him, then said, "Do you mean the *Roman* Catholic Church?"

Again a smile touched his lips. "Well, if you like to call it that, yes."

"But, Martin," her tone changed to something like horror, "we're Nonconformists. I didn't mind the Church of England

so much, but—Martin, I think that I'd better get the Rev. Goddard to come in and have a talk with you."

Martin thought that she used exactly the same tone as she might have done if she had said, "I think you'd better see Dr. Thirk." The thought of the stout, amiable little Nonconformist clergyman being brought in to "minister to a mind diseased" almost amused him.

"I'm afraid that he wouldn't shake me, Mama," he said.

"He's very clever—at least I've always thought him a very nice man, and some of his sermons are very good. Very."

"I'm sure of it," Martin returned, "but there are other people who have also written wonderful sermons; teachers, priests. I've talked to a good many of them already. Taken my problems to them, and—they ceased to be problems."

"Very likely," her tone was sharp, "they were Papists, I expect. They're always ready to make converts, they welcome them. Of course."

"They seemed singularly indifferent to me," he said. "I fully expected to be received with open arms. A kind of prodigal's return. Not a bit of it. They didn't even appear to recognise what a clever and intellectual fellow I was." He laughed. "They sent me to a priest who was old, and candidly, not particularly intelligent. I was ordered to learn this and have answers ready for that. Oh, it was honestly very boring indeed. I felt they might have made an exception in the case of that clever chap, Martin Forest."

"Martin, surely it's not a thing to joke about?"

"It certainly wasn't at the time. I was rather offended about it. Then it dawned on me, that of course, they wanted to see if I should get bored, if I should wither away in the sun, as it were. They didn't succeed. I stuck to my guns and my penny Catechism, and realised that my not over-intelligent tutor was giving me a really splendid grounding. Dull perhaps, but sound. So there it is, Mama. Thank Sir Thomas, I'll write and thank him too, if you wish, but I'm afraid it's—no go. My dear, don't look so distressed."

She was distressed. Martin, her baby, to be embracing a creed which had always seemed to her to be strange, and rather sinister. True, the nuns who came round collecting for the orphans at Nazareth House were kindly women; she always offered them tea in her own room, and gave liberally to their charity. They didn't seem grasping either; at their last visit she had told them that she hadn't seen them for a long time.

Mother Mary Agnes laughed. "It won't do to wear out our welcome with you, Mrs. Forest, and you always so generous."

Mother Mary Elizabeth added, "Don't we tell all our Catholic subscribers that they mustn't let themselves be beaten by Mrs. Forest, and she not even of our Faith! I've always a prayer for ye, Mrs. Forest, particularly on account of us having the same patron saint."

She had wondered if it were quite the thing to be prayed for by a Catholic, but had decided that the prayers of a woman with the kindly, tired eyes of Mother Mary Elizabeth couldn't be anything but a benefit. Still, it was one thing giving tea and cakes, to say nothing of money, to nuns, and quite another to have Martin joining their Church. Martin who, the authorities had told her, was destined for a brilliant career.

"You know that you'll never be able to marry, Martin," she warned.

He still smiled, "Oh, yes, I've no doubts on that score."

"And that you'll"—she was on less sure ground, and spoke slowly—"you'll have to believe that your mother and brothers will all burn in hell for ever. Did they tell you that?"

"Mama, dearest Mama," he begged, though his eyes still danced, "I am asked to believe nothing that limits the love and mercy of Almighty God! Don't make bogies, don't dress up broomsticks and swear that they're living things."

"They'll take all your money," she warned him.

"I have none!"

"You will have one day, when I'm gone."

"Long before then," he said, "we'll get a ruling from those in authority on this matter, and if we find that you're right, well, the remedy is in your hands. You shan't leave me any."

She sniffed her contempt. "That would disappoint them."

"What a satisfaction for you, you vindictive woman!"

She said, "I don't understand you, Martin. You're making game of me all the time, laughing about it. Religion's not a laughing matter."

"Don't you laugh when you're happy?" he asked. "It's not a laughing matter, but it's a cheerful matter. It's not gloom, and mystery, and fear. Listen, Mama—religion's a spiritual diet. I have found the one which suits my mental digestion. Therefore I feel very well, and remarkably content. It might not suit you, your digestion might refuse it. Don't be afraid for me, I shall be all right. If I can be a priest—I should have nothing else to wish for except to be a worthy one. I shan't grow long-faced,

I shan't even refuse a drink if you offer me one. I still smoke a pipe——"

"Not in my drawing-room," she said quickly. "I suppose you'll want to convert us all. Well, you won't convert me, Martin."

Suddenly grave, he said, "I shan't even try. If ever you want to know more of this Faith, you will have to come and ask me. I shan't offer it to you. Just believe that I'm happy, that I have never known such content, and that if I can put all the education which you have given me to good use, I shall feel that I have, in part at least, shown my gratitude for your generosity and kindness. Go on loving me, believing in my sincerity, and I'll try to make you proud of me."

"Make me!" she cried indignantly. "I'm proud of you already."

"Bless you"—he was smiling again—"and now we've got that off our chests, or rather now I have got it off mine, and you have faced the blow with splendid fortitude and courage—don't you think we might have a glass of your good port, to give us Dutch courage before Fredrick the Great descends upon us at six."

Elizabeth rose, and walked to the small sideboard, where she kept her own finely cut glasses and decanters.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she said, "it's all too much for me. Here I am jockeyed into buying a huge hotel that I don't want, and my son tells me that he wants to be a Roman Catholic priest." She poured out two glasses of port, and handed one to Martin; looking at his face intently, she said, "Yet you don't *look* any different. I'm not going to pretend that I like the idea, I don't. On the other hand, I can't say that I'm shocked, or angry. To tell you the truth, Martin, religion—the kind that means going to church and listening to long prayers, has never meant as much to me as just saying my own prayers at my own bedside night and morning. It takes all sorts to make a world, and I suppose the Lord sees some good in Romanists or He'd not have let them go on for so many years. I don't understand what good monks do shutting themselves away in monasteries, I don't know what the Pope's for, and why the poor old gentleman has to be shut up in the Vatican—perhaps you do. I will say that he looks a very kind old man, with that big smile of his. Mind you, I shall still ask God to bless you—as I ask Him to bless all of you. I shall use my ordinary prayers too. I suppose that won't matter, will it? Or do you think prayers that aren't Catholic prayers will be no good to you?"

"I think that your prayers would be good for anyone, whatever words you used."

She sipped her port with appreciation. "Queer to be talking about religion and drinking port! Why, that's a quarter to six. I want to change my dress before Fredrick comes. I don't think that we'll tell him or Percy about this religion of yours, not at the moment. We've got enough to argue about with this Majestic—drat the place!"

CHAPTER IX

FREDRICK

WILLIE CALLON faced Fredrick across the table in his private office. Fredrick's eyes had taken in all the details of the untidy, dusty place. Everything in a mess; he wondered how Callon ever found anything. He'd change all that! Callon looked white and nervous, he twisted a pencil in his long, thin fingers. Again Fredrick noted that Callon's nails were not so clean as they might have been. The man was going to bits.

"Now listen," Fredrick said, "the money will be paid to you immediately the sale is completed. I want you to stay on here for a month. A month, you understand. During that time you keep your mouth shut about the sale. I want a small private agreement to that effect, stating that if anyone gets to hear about it under a month I want an indemnity, and a swinging big one."

Callon blinked his eyes. "That's not usual."

"I don't care what's usual and what isn't. I'm an unusual man. Those are my terms."

"But the thing might leak out through something you said."

Fredrick smiled. "I can trust myself, Callon. You're the doubtful one, remember that."

Callon grumbled, "I don't know what the solicitor 'ul think."

"Let him think what he likes, so long as he gets the work done, done well, the rest's no concern of his. Then that's settled, eh?"

"I suppose so. I'll meet you at Greenwood's office to-morrow."

"Eleven o'clock, and"—Fredrick put on his hat at an angle, he felt satisfied and looked it—"keep your mouth shut."

He walked out of the Majestic, swaggering a little. He held his head high, squared his shoulders, and looked the picture of a man who has made a success of what he planned. He had persuaded his mother to buy the place, he had talked to Lawyer

Swan while his mother sat and listened. Swan had been impressed. Fredrick was insistent that the money must be paid down. There must be no series of payments, no paying the whole sum off in a year, two years, that was one of his main points.

Swan said, "That's all very well, Fred, but a sixty thousand takes some finding."

Elizabeth, making a last effort, protested, "I refuse to cripple my business for any Majestic."

Fredrick nodded. He felt more knowledgeable than either of them. After all Swan might be sufficiently clever, but he was only a provincial lawyer, and his mother, for all her acumen, had never travelled, never mixed with big business men or their immediate understrappers! Fredrick almost smiled at the thought. Those—understrappers!

"Strictly limited company," he said. "You've had them before. Have one again. For example: Sir Edward, Lady Bower, old Tommie Illing, Vane, Benfold—after all as your son-in-law he ought to trust your judgment, the old doctor—m' wife's father—why you can get the money together in no time."

"Remember," Elizabeth warned, "I keep the bulk of the shares, Amos. I want control, no shadow of doubt about that."

Of course the money had come in. News had got about—in a quiet, confidential way—and they could have had the whole capital subscribed, only his mother had refused.

Fredrick felt that she had been impressed with his keenness, his ability. She had even consented to his acting for her. Again he smiled. He'd acted to some tune. He had gone over the hotel with his mother, huge rambling place, dingy, with old-fashioned bathrooms, and not nearly sufficient of them either. Bad kitchens, inconvenient dining-rooms, and out-dated grill room.

She said, "I don't know, I'm sure. I believe we're letting ourselves in for something, Fredrick. I can't work miracles. It's a barn of a place, and shabby at that. Tut, tut—sixty thousand, and look what wants doing to it! I wish we'd left it alone."

He had pointed out whatever good points he could find, had stressed them, talked of the coming boom, assured her that when men came to Sunchester on business, so long as the beds were comfortable and the sheets clean they didn't want the last word in hotels.

She snapped, "I know what my guests like, and I know what I like them to have. Not what they get in this hole!"

Even that had not shaken his equanimity. He knew—they didn't. He made his way to a small restaurant off the main street.

The place was almost empty, except for two seedy-looking men who were playing dominoes, and a young man who was seated at the further end, reading a sporting paper. Fredrick walked to his table, and said, "Hullo, Felton, hope I'm not late."

Felton, a thin fellow with dark eyes set too close to his high bridged nose, put down the paper.

"Just on time. Sit down. Have a cup of coffee?"

Fredrick laughed. "Do they make coffee here—real coffee?"

"Not bad. Ellen—two coffees here. Well, it's going through. Meeting this morning, then a confidential conference. Sir Walter, Gibson, and Mowbray, and the confidential secretary, myself."

He spoke quickly, scarcely above a whisper. Fredrick resisted a temptation to lean forward and show his eagerness. He knew that his heart was beating heavily, hoped that his face had not flushed with excitement.

"Yes—and so?"

"All very guarded, even in front of me, and God knows I've had plenty of Sir Walter's private secrets through my hands in my time! They're going to build the new station, they've heard that. Callon wants to sell the Majestic, they want it. They'll pay him up to eighty thou. There's some discussion of paying a kind of supplement for the fittings, bars, stock and so forth."

"Call it roughly a hundred thousand."

Felton pursed his lips. "Might be, might not. Got that note for me, Forest?"

"No," Fredrick said, speaking easily and pleasantly. "I don't give notes. You've got to take my word that you get five hundred the day the deal is through."

"But damn it," the small eyes narrowed, "why should I take your word? You met me by chance, got me pickled to the eyes—oh, yes, you did. Pumped me dry, and now you tell me that I've got to trust you. What will you do if I go to Callon and spill the beans?"

Fredrick took out a large silver cigarette case, flicked it open and having taken a cigarette, offered the case to Felton. His manner was smooth and friendly, his voice entirely without any trace of anger. Fredrick Forest was enjoying himself. He was proving what he had always believed, that he was a very astute and clever fellow. True there might be arguments with his mother, there might even be some unpleasantness, but he could face that.

He said, "Callon is out of town, gone to see his aunt at Buxton. I saw him on to the train. He won't be back until to-morrow

afternoon. See him then, if you like. I don't mind. It's too late for Callon to do anything—now." He blew a smoke-ring with care.

"He's signed?" Felton's voice was sharper.

Fredrick watched the smoke ring, and neatly blew another through it. He pointed to the effect with his cigarette.

"Clever that!" he said. "Not many people can blow one ring through another. Oh, yes, he signed this morning." He tapped the side of his coat. "I've got the papers in my pocket. Yes, it's all sealed, signed, only waiting to have it delivered. I work fast."

"Who drew it up?"

"My solicitor."

"Who's he?"

Fredrick's smile was positively bland. "He's—oh, just my solicitor. Then that's settled." He sipped his coffee. "Don't think much of the coffee. I must be off—I shan't forget. I'm a man of my word, Felton. Good-morning, and after all, you've had two hundred to sweeten you. Never be greedy, you'll get the rest."

II

James Greenwood said, "Sign there, and there if you please, Mrs. Forest."

"I'll sign," Elizabeth said, "but I'm not best pleased about it. I don't like the place, I don't like the town, and the whole thing is a real worry to me."

"It's a good hotel," Callon said weakly, "it's got enormous possibilities."

"Of what?" sharply.

"Trade, development."

Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders, signed with a kind of defiance, and laid down the pen. "Now—I'll write the cheque. Let's hope that I'm not throwing money down a sink."

A month later William Callon, who had settled his most pressing difficulties, and sent his wife down to Torquay, where he hoped to follow her, was stopped in the entrance hall of the Majestic by Sir Walter Flemming.

"Ah, Mr. Callon," Flemming's manner was urbane, and tinged with condescension, "busy? No? I'd like a word with you. No, not here. In your office. I know where it is. I'll follow you there in five minutes. No need to let everyone know our business, eh?"

Five minutes later he arrived in the dusty, untidy office. The

scent of his immense cigar filled the room; Callon watched him with envy and admiration. This was the sort of man he admired. Immaculate, in grey frock coat, with an expensive flower in his button-hole. Perfectly shaved, admirably groomed, certain of himself and his ability. Years ago Callon had tried to dress well, tried to acquire a manner, but he had lost heart. He had lost heart about most things.

For ten minutes he listened to Sir Walter's smooth, rather heavy voice. A new station for Sunchester, and the site to be where the Majestic stood now. The old station was to be absorbed into the new one. A tremendous place, modern, well-planned, splendid.

"Something more worthy of the great railway which I represent," Sir Walter explained. "It's not a bad hotel, this place of yours, Callon, but it's old-fashioned. In the open market—well, it frankly wouldn't fetch a great deal. Candidly, you're in luck. The company are prepared to be generous, reasonably generous. If you fancied the idea of managing one of our places—somewhere pleasant, south coast for example, I think it might be arranged. We want to make things as easy as possible for you, and"—with a sudden burst of frankness, and a wide smile which showed a set of perfect teeth—"and for ourselves. We're not philanthropists, but we're not sharks."

Callon's face was even more pasty than usual. He glanced nervously at the calendar, it was a month yesterday since he signed the deeds transferring the hotel to Mrs. Elizabeth Forest, of the Forest Hotels. Fredrick was arriving this very night to take over.

He licked his lips. "Pardon me, Sir Walter, how long has this idea been in your minds? I mean—does anyone else know about it?"

"Not a soul. The idea has been hinted at in a general committee meeting and only discussed in the strictest privacy, I might say—secrecy. I offered to come and see you for that very reason. We wished to keep the whole business entirely secret."

Callon rose, and stood leaning on the table. His voice was high, almost hysterical, his lips trembled.

"Then you've not got your wish. I'll bet any money you like. Someone got wind of it; someone's made a packet over this, by God they have! I sold the bloody hotel exactly a month ago."

"You sold it? Who to?"

Callon stared at him. "Damn well find out!" he shouted. "Damn well find out, and get out of my blasted office!"

Sir Walter said, "Well, upon my word! Astonishing!"

As he closed the door behind him, Callon collapsed into his chair, and laying his head on his arms, began to sob wildly.

An hour later he packed and left the hotel, first scrawling a note which he addressed to Fredrick Forest. It ran, "You dirty dog! I felt that you were twisting me somehow. I'm going, and don't worry me with letters about the damned hotel. W. Callon."

Fredrick read the note on his arrival. He tore it into small pieces, and then asked the reception clerk if Sir Walter Flemming was in the hotel.

"In his room, sir, I believe. Number 30, and sitting-room."

"Ask if he would do me the favour of stepping down to my office, will you?" Then seeing the expression of astonishment on the man's face, he added, "Oh, of course, you didn't know. My name is Forest, I represent my mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Forest, of the Forest Hotels. We have bought the Majestic. I shall be resident manager here. Let Sir Walter have my message, if you please."

Fredrick spent a delightful evening with Sir Walter. He watched the great man change from being interested and faintly amused, from being over-polite and condescending to being irritable, nervous, and finally actually angry. He heard the rich, heavy voice become shrill with indignation. Fredrick, himself, was quiet, respectful, reasonable, but quite firm.

They did not wish to sell the Majestic, Fredrick protested, they had only bought it a month ago. The place was his mother's latest venture, and, he added, "As you know, I am sure, sir, my mother has a unique reputation for being a success in whatever she undertakes." No, he explained, patiently, they didn't really want huge sums of money, they could get whatever capital they needed. It was the idea of a large hotel in a huge and rapidly growing town which had attracted his mother. She had great plans for the Majestic, big schemes. No, nothing ever moved her once she made up her mind about anything. Oh, certainly, he would never dream of attempting to influence her. "I have been brought up to believe that my mother knows best in all matters appertaining to hotels. She has worked miracles, miracles." Did Sir Walter know the Royal Lion and the Ring of Bells, did he remember the King's Head at Blew Moor, the Grand at Forchester, the Bay Mare at Hilton? They were only a few of his mother's places. Sir Walter exploded, "But if your mother is so interested, let her build a new hotel and start fresh.

This is the only site possible for us." He could have cursed himself for saying that, particularly when he noted the particular blandness of the younger man's smile.

"Exactly what my mother will feel. The position of the Majestic is the only one suitable for us in Sunchester. Near the station——"

"That is often considered a drawback."

"Oh, not if the hotel has sufficient inducements to make up for a little excess of noise in shunting now and again. The Midland, Manchester, the Queen's at Leeds, the North British in Edinburgh—they don't lack guests for all their proximity to the stations, do they?"

"We're prepared to be generous——"

"Yes," patiently, "but as I say—we want the hotel."

"Damn it, d'you expect us to build you one?"

Fredrick's face cleared. "Now that is an idea, sir. There is that group of shops, facing the main street, the last one practically adjoining the Majestic. Their leases are on the point of running out. They'll be on the market. Of course, the new hotel would have to be to our—my mother's specifications."

"I'll tell you one thing, young man," Sir Walter said, "you know a damn sight too much."

"Do you think that one *can* know too much, sir?"

The knight narrowed his somewhat protruding eyes. "I wonder how much you do know, and where you got your knowledge from. I'd give a good deal to know that. I'll wager that you've been expecting this, eh?"

"How could I have expected it, sir? You railway companies guard your secret sessions too well, don't you?"

"Look here, young fellow, go and discuss this with your mother and your shareholders—if you have any—'pon my word you seem to be the most astonishing lot of people. Let me have a concrete plan, suggestions, all the rest of it. Mind you, I don't say that we're going to agree to anything you ask, remember there are other sites, the Majestic isn't the only one. You can't twist our tails too much, y' know. For two pins I'd end it now and tell you to take your damned hotel to hell!"

"We happen to want it in Sunchester," Fredrick said pleasantly, laughing at his own joke. "No, we don't want to be unreasonable, and be certain, sir, that when this new hotel is built one of the best suites will be always at the disposal of the Managing Director of the Midland Central Railway. Now, will you do me the honour of having dinner with me? I don't think

that the kitchen is up to our standard—the Forest Hotel standard as yet, but they shall do their best. I can offer you a vintage sherry—about 1850 or some Solera '58. I have a Monnet Liqueur Brandy which will interest you, and I can offer you too, a first-rate Pommard. Yes?"

Sir Walter puffed out his full lips. "You're an astonishing young man," he said. "Yes, thanks, I'll dine with you."

III

Fredrick Forest was giving a dinner party at the Ring of Bells. He had told Grace to order a new dress, something really elegant. He had spent a good deal of money on flowers for the long table which was set out in the long room where the Oddfellows and other societies gathered for their annual and somewhat noisy dinners. The room was transformed, the walls were hung with flags and bunting, the long table was covered with a rich damask cloth, and the silver and cut glass twinkled and glittered. The floor was covered with a magnificent carpet which Vane, of Vane Conyers, had lent for the occasion. Fredrick, in evening clothes of the finest and latest cut, awaited his guests. The room was well heated, and he stood on the hearth-rug surveying the result of his planning with satisfaction.

He had determined to have a dinner which should be original. Resolutely he banished huge fish, saddles of mutton, sirloins, and the like. He had engaged a chef from Polvoni's, in Leeds, and together they had planned the menu. Fredrick had insisted upon the printers sending him three sets of proofs before he was satisfied with the set-out of the menus themselves. The result was elegant. Moving to the table he picked one up and regarded it with satisfaction.

His lips moved as he read the names of the courses.

"Les Hors d'Oeuvre à la Sunchester, Oysters, Paupiettes de Sole Majestic, Vol-au-vent de Royal Lion, Poulet à la Ring of Bells, Salade Forest, Pêche Elizabeth." Then the wines. A fine old sherry, or cocktails—his mother would turn up her nose at them—a first-rate Chablis, Ayala, Cordon Bleu Cognac which had been nearly forty years in cask, and Bristol Cream well iced. This last an idea which he had got from a man who was reputed to be one of the greatest epicures in the North of England. Yes, the whole thing would make them open their eyes.

He'd done that already. They had him to thank for the fact that they were able to scrap the old-fashioned Majestic, and to

know that the New Majestic would rise on the site of those old shops, with a covered way running from the New Station to the hotel. It would rise without costing them a penny piece—the Midland Central were footing the bill. Not only that, he had insisted that they should give the contract, they should accept all the worry of builders and materials. Only when the place was complete, with its two hundred bedrooms, "many bedrooms with private bathroom," would the Forest Hotels take control.

His mother had been bewildered. Edward Bower had yelled with laughter, and shouted that Fredrick had started the game, and that Fredrick must be allowed to see it through. Fredrick had talked to Sir Walter, to Mowbray, to Cameron Gibson, every one of them had tried to discover the source of his information, Fredrick had been wide-eyed and innocent and disclaimed that he had any special information. He had followed the same line with his mother, with Bower, Percy, Vane and the rest. Sir Walter had become so friendly that he even consented to sign the cheque as Fredrick wished. Fredrick explained that his mother and her directors wished him to have his "little rake off." The Forest Hotels, represented by Elizabeth Forest had received a cheque for forty-five thousand pounds, Fredrick another for five thousand. He had paid Felton in cash, and Felton left England for America, having explained to Sir Walter that he wanted more "opportunities." Fredrick felt that if Felton didn't get them, he would no doubt make them and do well.

Elizabeth said, "I thought the amount agreed upon was fifty thousand, Fredrick."

He laughed, "Mama, what a grasping woman you are! Still, strictly speaking you're right. Fifty thousand plus a new hotel. Only"—he lowered his voice—"and I want you to regard this as confidential if possible, if you have to confide in anyone make them swear to respect your confidence. Sir Fredrick put the whole thing through in the face of great opposition. He really worked hard for the scheme. Well, thanks to him it went through. He expected, and demanded a—what's the expression he used?—rake off. I believe that it's quite usual, in these big concerns."

She said, "Well—five thousand! I call that pretty stiff."

Fredrick nodded. "It is, but he'll be useful to us in many ways. I felt it was worth paying." He shrugged his shoulders. "That's how business is done in these days, believe me."

Still, that was all over now. Here he was in this fine long

room, a bright fire burning at either end, awaiting his guests who were to offer him their congratulations.

Grace entered, looking tall and distinguished in her new dove-coloured dinner dress, her hair smooth and shining, her eyes very bright.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you, Fredrick dear. I am so proud of you."

He bent and kissed her. "I want you always to be proud of me," he said. "Your love means everything to me, Grace dearest."

"Dear Fredrick."

The guests were announced. Fredrick explained that he was merely the keeper of a humble hotel, and begged them to regard one end of the room as his drawing-room, the other as the dining-room. "Though I promise that after dinner the ladies shall find their way to my wife's little drawing-room, to give Sir Edward an opportunity to tell us—his latest!"

Sir Edward and Lady Bower, Sir Thomas Illing, Mr. Blattly of Hilton and his wife, Elizabeth Forest and her son Percy, Mr. and Mrs. Benfold—Fredrick thought that though his sister was only twenty-nine she was growing abominably stout, looking almost middle-aged, a pity!—Amos Swan and his queer, dried-up sister, Lord Swathford's smart agent, Captain Masters, and his good-looking, hard-riding wife, and Dr. Ben Harrison. As Fredrick watched them from his seat at the head of the table, he felt again that thrill of satisfaction. He had gathered these people together, he had arranged a dinner for them which was unusual, he had proved himself to be as keen a man of business as any of them. His good-looking if rather heavy face shone with pleasure, and good wine.

The fact that he had put through his recent enterprise by methods which would not bear too much scrutiny, and which might have been condemned as deviating from accepted moral standards, did not trouble him in the least. Had anyone accused him of being dishonest Fredrick would have resented it keenly. His methods were business. If he could get the better of other men then the means which he used to do so were his own affair. He had hurt no one, on the contrary he had made it possible for Felton to go to America where, no doubt, he would do well. He had virtually assisted the Central Midland to enlarge their station and so expand the business activities of Sunchester. His mother and her shareholders were more than satisfied—a new hotel and forty-five thousand into the bargain. If they

were satisfied with forty-five thousand, why should he worry about the other five, nearly four of which reposed in his bank at the moment. Had that five thousand been all his mother possessed, had she been in actual need of the money, he argued, that nothing would have persuaded him to touch a penny of it. He could even regard himself as something of a philanthropist in the case of Willie Callon. Callon had his original purchase money, he was safely installed in some south coast town with his ailing wife, his own private tangles were straightened out, in fact life was, or ought to be, a bed of roses for William Callon, late of the Majestic Hotel, Sunchester. Fredrick reflected, as he sipped his beautifully chilled Bristol Cream, Fred Forest was certainly not a bad fellow at all, on the contrary, he was a damned good chap and a remarkably clever man.

He rose, lifted his glass—the second which he had filled—and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, may I give you a toast? To that wonderful person who has made all our successes possible. I give you, my dear mother, Elizabeth Forest.”

Elizabeth wiped her eyes, and whispered to Edward Bower, “How proud my dear husband would have been of Fredrick, had he been spared to us.”

The stout knight replied, “Yes, m’dear, Fred’s a good fellow, and a clever fellow. So he should be with you for his mother.”

CHAPTER X

FREDRICK

MRS. IVOR MASTERS sat her chestnut mare well. A handsome woman, even though her face was a little hard. Fredrick, watching her control the fidgety mare as she talked to him, thought that he wouldn’t care much to be controlled by Isobel Masters. Those hands were too firm, and her expression of sudden and intense annoyance when the mare moved nervously too definite.

‘Both the mare and the woman too damned quick-tempered,’ Fredrick reflected.

He was seated in his new car, a long ultra-modern machine which was the talk of the neighbourhood. The first car painted silver in the district, he called it “The Silver Slipper.” Elizabeth had frowned when first she saw it, she had no particular love for motor cars, and she considered this one ostentatious and vulgar.

Fredrick laughed at her objections. "You couldn't imagine me driving about the country in a 'bus like yours, Mama, surely. It may be comfortable, but I must have speed. Grace likes her Standard, she prefers it to this one, and so we've all got what we want. That's the new watchword—tolerance of other folks' wishes. Then the world would get on a lot faster."

"Faster," his mother retorted. "I don't understand all this craving for everything being done faster, faster, faster."

"Time is money," her son said.

"I don't understand the craze for that either," Elizabeth answered. "I've more money than I know what to do with."

He laughed. "I wish that I could say the same! With Gladys at this expensive school in Paris, James and Francis costing the Lord only knows what at school as well, the money seems to melt like snow in the sun."

His mother gave him one of those queerly disquieting glances which always had the effect of making him wonder how much she knew, how much of his private life was understood by her.

"You don't do so badly, Fredrick," she said, "two thousand a year, and—pickings, you can't make less than three thousand. Grace has her own money since Dr. Ben died. I often think you're extravagant."

"I—extravagant, Mama!" He was indignant. "I might be, if it were possible, but it's not. Oh, I can't go about like a tramp, and the car's a necessity when you remember the ground I cover. Sunchester, back here, on to Gloucester, and now Brighton."

She returned to her original complaint. "I don't know what we want with all these great places. Brighton—imagine it! We're growing too big, we've too many irons in the fire. I still maintain that, allowing for the amount of money I put into them originally, the small places show the best returns. Look at the Bay Mare, it's a little gold mine."

Now, Mrs. Masters' words interrupted his thoughts. Her voice was rather harsh, but distinct. She was a South-country woman, and he found her vowels a pleasant change from the broader sounds of the North.

"You ought to ride, Mr. Forest," she was saying. "Nothing like it for keeping you fit."

He remembered the new craze for physical fitness. Everyone talked about "being fit" in these days.

"I am fit," he protested. "Look at me."

"Fit!" she returned her voice scornful. "Not what I call fit. You're too heavy, I'll lay a fiver." Then suddenly to the

mare, "Keep still, you devil, can't you? I must be getting along. When are you coming to see those pups of mine. One would suit you very well. Nice little beasts, and the mother's first-rate."

"When are you coming to see me at Sunchester?" he asked. "I've been making alterations there. Smartest hotel in the provinces."

She stared down at him, her eyes suddenly narrowed; he saw the little pucker between her well-marked eyebrows.

"I might run over one day," she said. "If you promise that the food is good and the beds comfortable." She snapped at the mare, "Get on, for God's sake—*move*."

Fredrick twisted round in the car to catch a last glimpse of her straight back in its excellent riding coat, then, smiling a little, drove on, admiring the quiet purr of the car's engine. He was a busy man in these days, a successful man, and a popular one. Grace and he lived in splendid apartments at the Majestic, the hotel was his "pet" and nothing was too good for it. He had installed every possible modern invention which made for additional luxury. The hotel was talked of with admiration and respect, and now he was planning to visit America in order to find new ideas. True, his mother was still the controlling force, and more than once their wills had clashed, when she stigmatised some new innovation as preposterous, or ridiculous. Lately she had shown more and more inclination to hold the reins less firmly, and to centre her interest in those original Forest Hotels—those small, exquisitely kept places which had made her name and founded her fortune. She was sixty-five, as energetic as ever, but growing less and less willing to leave the Royal Lion for more than twenty-four hours. Well, that suited him, he was very well able to manage the newer and larger hotels. Already he had hinted to Grace that he wanted an hotel in London.

"A super hotel, the most luxurious place in Europe. A place where foreign royalties stay, where the hotel's private detectives are always on the alert. The place which confers a kind of favour on the visitors by allowing them to be there at all. I'll have it yet."

II

He dressed for dinner, and went along to their own private drawing-room. Grace was there, looking as she invariably did in these days, charming and expensive. That dress must have cost a pretty penny! She said, "Ring for cocktails, will you?"

He rang, and enjoyed the entrance of Adolf, their own waiter. Adolf was immaculate, he was smart, he spoke six languages, and had the manners of a duke, or possibly more correctly, of a duke's major-domo.

Grace said, "I want a White Lady. What do you want, Fred?"

"Your own 'special,' Adolf. Got a name for it yet?"

Adolf bowed, "I 'ad t'ought—with your pairmission—Fredrr-rick zee Grrreat, sir."

"Fredrick the Great!" He flung back his head and laughed. "Well, I accept the compliment. Many thanks, Adolf. It is certainly a most excellent cocktail."

"As ess everrsing at zee Maj-es-tic, sir."

Sipping cocktails, he told Grace of his encounter with Mrs. Masters.

Grace said, "Detestable woman! Because her father is a baronet, and hasn't two pennies to rub against each other, she imagines that she can leave her manners at home."

"Oh, come, come!" He refused to allow her to rattle him. "She's a bit downright, but she's not so bad. She told me that she and Masters might be coming to Sunchester before long. We must give 'em a dinner that will show them what we can do, eh?"

Grace set down her empty cocktail glass. "She *and* Captain Masters, did you say?"

"Yes—why, of course. Now, what about dinner?"

It was his custom to dine in the hotel except on such evenings as they entertained privately. He dined with some ceremony, making an entrance, being escorted to his table by Pietro, the head waiter. He enjoyed being pointed out by the guests to such people as were less well-informed. He liked to bow from his table to someone he knew, to send messages asking if this or that person would come and take coffee with him and Mrs. Forest. He loved good food, and the chef at the Majestic had once cooked for an emperor. Fredrick liked to make Monsieur Louis Marie Montier recount tales of the great ones of the earth. Titles, the names of dukes and archdukes, the nicknames of kings and emperors dripped from his lips. He had huge volumes of menus, and could tell stories of them all.

"Theese vas ven the laate Keeng of Porrtugal visitit the Emperor in Vienna! The Emperor 'e sent forr me. 'Luis,' he say, 'let uss prrove to my beloved brudder of Portugal that in Vienna we do not only eat—we dine!'"

He knew the favourite dishes of the Emperor of Germany, could tell amusing stories of his "pink" champagne, how he and King Edward of England were always at daggers drawn, and why. Fredrick could have listened to him for hours.

To-night Pietro came, smiling and bowing, to whisper that Monsieur Louis begged that Mr. and Mrs. Forest would taste the sole.

"Cooked," Pietro assured them, "in zee vay 'e cook eet for the Keeng of Spain when 'Is Majesty sent for 'eem and compliment 'eem on zees magnificent pro-duction. Ver' interesting, no?"

Savouring the sole, Fredrick said to Grace, "The King of Spain has risen in my estimation. Perfect!"

Grace said, "I had a letter from Gladys to-day, she wants to come home and study hotels. Her ambition is to keep one, it appears."

"Nonsense! What does she want with hotels? She's pretty, she ought to marry well."

"She seems to have been reading about the Suffragists, and to believe they're right. She wants a career, she says."

For the first time Fredrick's face flushed with annoyance.

"Those damned women! I'd have the lot of them flogged. Flogged! That would put an end to their hysterical nonsense. A lot of soured old maids, hating men because no man's ever wanted to marry any of 'em."

"Some of them are married," Grace said quietly.

"Then their husbands ought to know how to deal with them."

"Their husbands may approve."

"Then they aren't men, they're some kind of damned herma-phrodite."

"Or, perhaps, like myself, they don't tell their husbands."

He stared at her, and she noticed how his eyes had come to protrude a little since he put on so much weight.

"What—what the devil are you saying, Grace?"

"Trying to tell you that, like my daughter, I believe that women have a right to have a voice in the governing of their country."

"My dear girl, for God's sake don't talk rubbish. You've got everything you can possibly want, why on earth should you want to spend your life running in and out of polling booths. Pah!"

She continued to dissect the Chicken Marengo. She did not look up at him, and when she spoke her voice was still very quiet.

"I don't want to argue about it," she said. "I intend to do all I can. I was talking to Lady Bower a few days ago when she was here; she agrees with me. She gave me a very large cheque for the organisation in town."

"That pestilent woman! I've always loathed her. Always thought that poor old Bower must have had a dog's life."

"Edward Bower adored her, and you know it. She's a brilliant woman, and you know that too. I'm going to London the day after to-morrow, on work for the Extension of the Franchise."

"If you disgrace me," he almost spat the words at her, "by God, I'll turn you out. I'll have no wife of mine trolloping about with those unsexed devils."

For the first time Grace Forest raised her eyes and looked at her husband.

"I might have said that so often to you, Fredrick—when you disgraced me. Only I couldn't turn you out, but I could—leave you. I shall one day, because you won't change—now."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. No, thank you, Pietro, iced water for me."

Fredrick sat silent, he ate the food which was set before him, but he ate without real enjoyment. Grace had ruined his dinner. He had come home full of the queer excitement which possessed him when he was attracted to a woman, when he felt that she shared his feelings. He had known that Grace was going to town, he had hoped that Mrs. Masters might come to Sunchester while she was away, he had hoped—— Now Grace was going to be difficult. More than that, she was going to get herself dragged into this indecent nonsense of the Suffragettes. He would be a laughing-stock, men would make jokes at his expense, he would have to admit that in spite of his detestation of the Pankhursts, the Annie Kennys, and the whole boiling of them, he couldn't prevent his wife from joining them.

He finished dinner in sulky silence, and without speaking they went back to their own rooms. In the drawing-room, Grace stood before the fire, a place which Fredrick always felt should be consecrated to the man of the house, and began to talk to him.

"Fred, we've been married a long time," she said. "Our girl is twenty. The boys are growing up. They're fine children, good children, children with a proper sense of ambition. I intend that their ambition shall never deteriorate as yours has done."

Pouring out a whisky and soda, he said, "I tell you I don't understand all this. What the hell are you talking about?"

"You," she returned, her voice very calm and perfectly even. "You, Fred. You're ambitious, but you're ambitious for yourself. You want success so that you can be praised, lauded, flattered. Your mother is an autocrat, but she's a beneficent autocrat. Prosperity has stabilised her, it has almost ruined you."

Staring at her, his head lowered as if he were going to charge, he said: "That's right. You'll tell me that I don't work hard in a minute, that I fritter away my time."

"You do fritter away a great deal of it," Grace agreed. "When you work you want all the necessary trappings. You want to call all your servants to you, you want to sit in a comfortable chair, with a large cigar in your mouth, you want to hear them flatter you. Oh," with sudden impatience, "do you think they don't realize that too? Adolf, Pietro, Montier, the floor managers—every one of them knows that you must have everything made smooth. Fred, you've grown soft! You may have made a success of this place, of Gloucester, you may make a success of the Callingly at Brighton, but you'll do it all so easily."

"Shows what a clever chap I am."

"It shows," she said, "that your position enables you to employ specialists; they work, you listen to what they have to say. The person who keeps everything within bounds is your brother Percy. His figures are real, and everyone knows it. You've grown soft, the whole concern—the Forest Hotels—has grown too big. Fred, let us clear out of this huge place, put in a manager, let's go back to the Ring of Bells."

He stared at her, his mouth slack. "Back to the Ring of Bells? Have you gone crazy. Back to a small pub in a market town, with twenty bedrooms, and a dining-room that can't hold more than forty people. You're shouting about the children. D'you ever think what they cost? What their bills come to? It's impossible! I've worked like a slave for my children, I intend that they shall have every advantage. I refuse to take life easily and so rob them of all that is best and most necessary for their equipment in after life."

"You're wrong," she said sadly, "quite wrong. You and Percy and Martin went to a small Grammar School—oh, Martin went to the University, I know, but neither you nor Percy did. Has it been such a handicap?"

"I lay myself open to a sneer, I suppose, if I say that both Percy and myself are rather remarkable people—each in our own way."

"I shan't sneer," she told him. "I've said what I intended to say, only one thing more. I know you very well, Fred, far better than you have ever imagined, and—I am a little tired of this long series of affairs in which you indulge. I remember the first—I thought that I should have died of shame. I remember others—often you did not know that I knew. A barmaid, one of my housemaids, Mrs. Walker, and now—you are contemplating another. Very well, I'm tired of it all. I am not vindictive, but I will remain *decent*. If I know that you are flinging yourself into another intrigue, I shall leave you, and the children will come with me. That is all."

"And enough!" he retorted furiously. "I have never listened to such a concoction of wicked rubbish in my life! You damn well find fault with me. Me! God, I've worked like a slave to give you everything. You want me to go backward, I reply that I shall go forward. Women! I defy you to prove that I have ever been unfaithful to you. Barmaids! Because I am reasonably pleasant to some girl or other. Housemaids! That's a pretty thing to say. Mrs. Walker! I've not seen the woman for years. No, my dear, as Saint John said, 'Evil communications corrupt good manners,' and I fancy that your Screaming Sisterhood have corrupted yours."

Very quietly Grace said, "Saint Paul, I think."

He returned, "Oh, damn it, who cares!"

He flung out of the room, and spent the rest of the evening in the big Palm Court, only breaking off his conversation with his friends to scrawl a note, which he sent up to Grace.

"I am bitterly hurt. I shall sleep in the dressing-room.

"FRED."

Two days later Grace went to London. She had scarcely exchanged a dozen words with Fredrick, who wrapped himself in a mantle of gloomy, if silent, resentment. She met him at breakfast on the morning she left, he sat there wearing a magnificent padded silk dressing-gown, except for which he was fully dressed. She watched him, noting his appearance as if he had been a stranger to her.

She noted the spotless linen, the dark, shining tie, the luxury of the splendid dressing-gown; she saw how smooth and well-brushed his hair was, how cleanly shaved was his chin. He exuded a faint smell of expensive Eau de Cologne. She saw how his jaw line had become blurred with excess of flesh, how the pouches beneath his eyes showed more plainly than they had

done five years ago, how the joints of his fingers were growing a little stiff and swollen.

She said, "I am going to London by the ten-thirty, Fred."

He glanced up from his letters. "Really."

"I may not—be back for some time."

This time he stared at her. "You're not contemplating any wild cat excesses, are you?"

"I am contemplating nothing, I shall obey my orders."

He pushed his letters aside, and laid his hands palm down on the table.

"Look here," he said, "if you think that I shall come and bail you out if you make a laughing-stock of yourself, you're mistaken. You can go to jail, it's where the whole damned lot of you ought to be—and I hope you enjoy it. That's all! Go to your blasted Wild Women!"

She went to London, she reported at the Headquarters of the League, she took her orders from a stout, heavily-built woman who spoke with a broad Scots accent.

"Ye're sairtain that ye wush tae dae this, Mrs. Forest?"

"Quite certain."

"Ye real-ise that the Government arre growing just a wee bit tired of us and our—disturbances?" The wide, friendly mouth smiled.

"I do." Grace gave her back her smile. "Frankly, I don't blame them."

"My good gurl, they've the remedy in their ain haunds."

"Oh, I realize that."

"Very weel, ye'll mak' ye're way tae the London Pavilion, and ye'll receive ye're orrders from Steward Number Eight. Now, don't lose ye're heid, an' don't think that ye're required tae dae ony special thinking. Ye're under orrders, Mrs. Forest."

By seven o'clock that evening, Grace Forest found herself locked in a particularly dank and unpleasant cell in one of London's best known police stations. She had attended the meeting at the London Pavilion, she had seen a small, thin woman dash on to the stage, had heard the whisper go round that she had been smuggled into the building in a huge theatrical hamper, with "Marie Lloyd" painted on the side.

"The old idea," a short, stocky woman said, laughing immoderately. "Shakespeare had it first!"

Grace had listened to stories of forcible feeding, and shivered at the sheer horror of it. Dorothy Pethick, Charlotte Marsh; they were heroines, she would have willingly died for them. For

the first time in her life, Grace Forest was consciously uplifted. She was facing something greater than she had ever known. Claudia Bower had said to her, "They're imbued with the spirit of Crusaders—they're the several reincarnations of Joan of Arc; they're magnificent. As women they may be just as tiresome as most women are, but as fighters—they're sheer wonders."

She had marched in procession to Westminster, her heart filled with happiness that she was able to share something of the great effort, the effort which was to give women their freedom. There, outside the Houses of Parliament, something had happened. Standing in the rear ranks of the procession, Grace heard the shouts which came from the forefront of the long line of women. She saw women dragged past, caught and held by policemen, saw one woman with her face streaming with blood, another who fought like a wild cat, screaming, "My God, you brute! How dare you!" Saw others walking steadily and quietly, with pale, set faces, faces which only lit up suddenly and momentarily as another woman's voice from the waiting ranks called, "Good luck! God bless you." They were pressing forward, and Grace found herself in the front rank. Horses were being ridden towards them, great, beautiful beasts impelled by the men who were seated on their broad backs. A woman screamed, "My foot! Get back!" Policemen were working their way into the ranks of the women, their voices were thick, heavily charged with some strange emotion which made them seem unlike the voices of human men capable of human sympathy.

"Cum 'ere, you! Be'ave yersen!" "Noaw, moind whatcher doin'," "Come yer waays along of me, missus." "It's impossible tae hae ye wimmen behaving thus way. Ye oucht tae know better—at your age too." Police drafted in from all parts of England to fight the women, so that no one district should be held blameworthy for the carrying out of the tactics advised and recommended by the authorities. Terrorise the women. Forcibly feed them. Break their spirit. Show them that might is right, and where that might lies. Sicken them, frighten them, break their nerve.

The women were frightened, glancing round, Grace could see terror in their eyes, saw lips which shook, bodies which were taut with fear, but not one of them tried to break away from the crowd and make for safety. Grace remembered a poem she had learnt at school, something about a sea fight. Six against sixty-three—was that it? "And still he said 'Fight on'."

She thought, 'Yes, they're frightened—I'm terrified. They look frightened—I must too, I expect. But it's our bodies that are afraid, not our spirits.'

A large hand pushed her in the chest. "Get along home, or it may be worse for you."

"I'm going on," she heard her own voice high and defiant.

The hand closed on her left breast, slowly she felt the flesh twisted, knew not only pain but furious anger. She was being manhandled, insulted.

"Let go, you swine, how dare you!"

The impression of a scarlet face thrust near her own, of large, white teeth and a mouth which grinned. The pain increased, the great hand had her firmly in its clutch. She yelled, "Let me go!"

She tried to twist herself loose, heard the sound of a laugh from the open mouth, and then—almost crazy with pain, with the indignity of it all—she spat into the scarlet face.

The rest had been a red hot blur, her feet dragging, her voice shouting, her hat torn from her head, and again and again a great muscular knee, driving her forward as it struck against her buttocks. Then an inspector asking for her name, questions fired at her, a queer high-pitched sound shaken with tears—tears of fury—which was her own voice, and—this cell.

She slept, uneasily, restlessly, and in the morning was taken before the magistrate. There he sat, small, thin, precise, dried. Women's names—Annie Kenny—she was to go back to prison, she flung back her head defiantly, and disappeared from the dock; Flora Drummond, and a speech from the desiccated magistrate about the wickedness of instigation, and the majesty and might of the law.

Other names—unfamiliar, and then her own.

Grace Forest.

"Your first offence . . . trust that this will bring you to a better and wiser frame of mind. . . . Don't come before me again . . . a married woman, should know better . . . disgrace . . . disorderly conduct. Your fine, as a first offender, has been paid. You are dismissed."

Outside, breathing the air untainted by the scent of carbolic and scrubbing soap, and Claudia Bower coming towards her.

"Yes, I paid it. Don't be angry. You'll have your chance of prison if you want it. Of course I approve, I'd be in it myself, but I think my money's more use than I should be. I've the car here, come back to Portland Place for a bath and a meal."

CHAPTER XI

FREDRICK

THE night train to Sunchester. Claudia had begged her to stay but Grace refused. She was terribly tired; exhausted by excitement and the new experiences through which she had passed. Looking back, the scene in Whitehall seemed a nightmare. It could not have been possible. She had told Claudia, and watched her eyes harden.

"They act under orders," she said. "They're drunk with the power given to them to mishandle women. It's a fostered cruelty, an artificial bestiality. The average copper is a decent fellow, a kindly fellow, but he's caught in the machine. Damn the Government! Courage, m'dear, you'll beat 'em yet. One day, you'll live to see a statue erected to Mrs. Pankhurst—and let's hope it's where Boadicea in her chariot can see it, and send a greeting to another woman who was left 'bleeding from the Roman rods.' Oh, it will come."

Grace lay back in the carriage, and tried to sleep. She was dead tired, and yet sleep refused to come. Instead, she felt that never had her brain been so active, so alive. She was trying to come to some correct assessment of her own affairs. That her duty regarding the Suffrage Question was clear, she did not doubt; what worried and distressed her was what position she ought to adopt regarding her husband.

She had married Fred Forest loving him devotedly. Again and again she had found excuses for him, had forgiven him, and had deceived herself into the belief that "it would never happen again." Looking back, down the twenty-one years of her married life, she knew that he had passed from one "affair" to another. There had been a long succession of women to whom he had made love. Each affair had ended, only to leave the path clear for another to begin. More than that, Fred himself was deteriorating. He was growing soft, luxury-loving, arrogant, self-satisfied. She did not doubt that he would always be successful; as she had told him, he was in a position to pay for the work of men who were all specialists in their own line. He talked now of little except himself and his ability, his acumen, his cleverness. He ate too well, he drank too much, his clothes—always expensive—had become something of an obsession.

Gladys was twenty, the boys were on the point of leaving school; was it fair to them to allow them to come back to a home where their values must inevitably be false? Did she want to see her sons growing up in an atmosphere of bowing waiters, obsequious managers, toadying maid-servants, smooth-tongued valets? If they were to enter the hotel business then they must start from the lowest rung. They must be sent to the school in Lausanne for hôteliers, they must come back to London to work in the kitchen of some big London hotel, they must take their places as receptionists, and not be carried into the business on the shoulders of their father.

Her love for Fred had died, she knew that; its place had been taken by the love which she felt for her children, and her determination to make them fight to attain a position in whatever career they might choose.

Sunchester station looked strange and unfriendly when she arrived at half-past one. The porters' faces under the arc lamps were white and tired. The inspector touched his cap and gave her a "Good-morning, Mrs. Forest. Sorry ter hear you'd been in bother. Glad to see yer back. Not given it up, have you?"

Grace smiled at him. "No, it's all going on, there'll be no giving up."

He grinned. "That's the spirit, Mrs. Forest. I'm an I.L.P. man. I know you've got right on your side. No one 'ul be more glad of your vict'ry nor what I will. Good-morning."

She walked down the covered corridor to the hotel conscious that her heart was lighter. Then there were men who believed in the justice of the Cause. There were people who didn't regard Suffragists as a mob of crazy women.

Her own room was empty. Fred must have been in for the evening, for the ash trays were filled with cigarette ends, and there were dirty glasses standing about. She went into her bedroom, that too was empty, and the door of the dressing-room was ajar. She glanced in, intending to close the door so that the light should not disturb him. He was not there. She sat down before the very modern gas fire in her bedroom, and realized that she longed for a cup of tea. She was not concerned about Fred. In all probability he had gone with one of the guests to a private suite—it might be that Sir Walter Flemming was staying for the night. He always kept Fred up until the early hours. At the moment, tired and mentally exhausted as she was, the possibility of a cup of tea loomed larger on her horizon than the whereabouts of her husband.

The door opened softly, and her own maid, Annie Crowther, who had come with her from Callingly, entered.

She was a gaunt, elderly woman, with very bright eyes and thick brown hair. She had come to the Ring of Bells as a housemaid, and later Grace had reserved her for their own rooms entirely. Later still, she had become Grace's personal maid, and when she came to Sunchester, Annie took it for granted that she would come too. She was neat-handed, a beautiful needlewoman, scrupulously honest, and her loyalty to her mistress was unquestionable.

Grace looked round as she entered, "Oh, Annie! What are you doing at this time of night? You ought to be in bed."

"Why if I oughter, so ought you, Mum. Noa, I'd sum sort o' idea as you might cum back bi t' laate train, I thout, 'Nay, I'll wait while t'last train's in afore I get to my bed.' You'd be able ter do wi' a coop o' tea, I'll lay, Mum."

Grace sighed with relief. "Annie, I was just thinking that I'd sell my soul for a cup."

"No call ter do that, Mum. T'kettle's on, and I'll have it here i' less nor a minute. There's your dressing-gown laid ready. Slip inter it while I get t'tea, Mum."

In a dressing-gown, her feet in soft slippers, Grace sipped her tea with appreciation.

Annie sat with folded hands watching her.

"And soa you got locked oop, Mum?"

"Yes, I spent the night in the police station, Annie; and very nasty it was too."

"Nasty toads," Annie returned with venom, "mishandlin' ladies and goin' on that daft road. Why if it's reit fur ladies ter have a vote—and if they not as able ter use 'em as what men is, I'll give oop—well, it's reit, and reit's no man's wrong. My word, I'm one as 'as heard Mrs. Pankhurst speak, aye, and her daughters, and Miss Kenny, and many more on 'em. I'd like ter be oop i' Lunnon ter gie some on 'em a taste o' my tongue—Members o' Parliment! I'll tell you what it is, Mum, they don't want ladies like what you are, an' Mrs. Pankhurst, and Mrs. Drummond and the rest to 'ave the chance ter get inter Parliment. They're well aware as the ladies 'ud show 'em oop for the ninnies 'arf on 'em are. Not including such as Mr. Lansbury o' course."

"I saw Mr. Lansbury when I was in London," Grace said.

"Now that's a reel nice man," Annie responded.

Later Grace wondered what made her ask at that particular

juncture where Fred was. Was it that her thoughts swung from the fact that George Lansbury was "a reel nice man," and that she had long since ceased to think of her husband in those terms?

"Oh, Annie, where is Mr. Forest?"

"Why, Mum, I couldn't rightly saay. He was here earlier on, for Mrs. Masters, from Callingly, is staying 'ere. She was admiring the rooms, saying 'ow luverly it all loked. Very delighted an' taken oop wi' everything she was. 'Why, Annie,' she said, when she saw me, 'fancy meetin' you 'ere. Like 'ome from 'ome'. The master laughed an' said that was what plenty of folks said about the Majestic."

"He didn't expect me to-night then." She wondered what made her ask that.

"Well, Mum, what 'e said ter me was that 'e reckoned as you'd stayed wi' Lady Bower. Prop'ly oopset 'e was over the newspaper reports. 'Is faace was white as a corpse—well, a lot whiter, for I've seen corpses as never reely lost their colour. My sister's 'usband, Dick Carter, never did. I don't think as the master exackerly 'olds wi' the Suffrage ladies, Mum."

Grace set down her cup. "No—the inspector who took my ticket does. He told me so. Thank you for the tea, Annie. Oh, I am so tired."

Annie nodded. "You will be, Mum, not being used—as one might say—ter being taken oop bi t'p'lice. Well, good-night, Mum, and if I were you, I'd sleep laate."

Despite her weariness, Grace slept badly. She slept in snatches, waking again and again, listening for any sound in the dressing-room. She remembered, when she had looked into the room, that Fred's splendid pyjamas and elaborate dressing-gown were not lying laid out on the bed. She knew, too, that the valet, Williams, never forgot to do this. Where was Fred, had his absence any connection with Mrs. Masters' visit to the hotel?

'If this is another affair,' Grace thought, 'I shall keep my word. I shall go back to Callingly—and how thankful I shall be to be out of this horrible place, to be free of its luxury, the elaborate meals, expensive wines, the eternal music, the smell of cigars.'

She slept, and woke hearing someone moving about in the dressing-room. Turning she saw that the illuminated clock over her bedroom door showed the time to be half-past five. Switching on the light by her bed she called, "I'm back, Fred."

She knew that he stood perfectly still at the sound of her voice, then the door opened, though he did not appear, he only

said, "You're back, are you. Nice show you've made of yourself. I'll talk to you in the morning, my girl."

She said, "It's morning now. You're very late."

"I've been talking to some men in a private suite. Nothing to do with you, is it?"

"A very informal party," she returned, wondering why she could feel so amazingly calm. "Were you all in dressing-gowns and pyjamas?"

That brought him to the door, he stood there, his hair ruffled, blinking his eyes, his face both furious and startled.

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Neither your pyjamas nor your dressing-gown were in your room when I got back at twenty minutes to two."

"That is a lie—a damned lie. Where the devil do you think I should go in a dressing-gown? What's the matter with you? This blasted Screaming Sisterhood turned your brain, eh?"

Grace yawned, she was suddenly wonderfully and delightfully sleepy.

"I think it's more than probable that you were with Mrs. Masters."

"Mrs. Masters—d' you mean from Callingly? You *are* crazy."

"I'm dead with sleep—or the want of it," she said. "Do go away and we'll discuss it in the morning."

II

Fredrick Forest spent a wretched night. He lay there, trying to make plans. As soon as Grace had left for London, he had telephoned to Isobel Masters. He had everything ready in case Masters answered the telephone. The dogs—he wanted to know how soon he could have one. However, she answered it herself. He felt that he had been amusing. He said plaintively that he was a neglected husband, had said one or two spiteful but witty things about the Suffragists.

Mrs. Masters said, "Oh, those damn' fools!"

He asked if she didn't think it might be pleasant to come over to dine, perhaps dance, and stay the night. "I'll promise to take care of you," Fred added.

She replied that she could take care of herself, always had done, but she didn't see why she shouldn't. Masters, it appeared, was away with Swathford in Ireland, she was bored to death—yes, she'd come. Drive over.

She came, they lunched excellently, she looked well-groomed, talked amusingly, swore attractively. Some of her stories were astonishingly outspoken, as were many of her remarks. By the time tea was served in Grace's drawing-room, Fredrick knew that he had fallen in love with her. His pulses quickened when she looked at him, and when she left him, going to dress for the evening, and said, "You're rather a darling, y'know," he had felt the blood rushing to his head.

They dined, he told her that she was the most attractive woman in the room, and by far the best-dressed.

She stared at the other women who were dining.

"God knows none of 'em are beauties," she said, "and their clothes may have cost a lot but they're sheer hell. Thanks for nothing, Fred."

"You're so different——" he said.

She laughed, "All cats are grey in the dark!"

He grinned suddenly. "I've not had the chance to see you—in the dark."

They danced, and he knew that the wine they had drunk had affected them both a little. He felt excited and elated, her eyes were very bright, her lips provocative, all her movements seemed calculated to stir him. It was half-past eleven when they left the ballroom, and went back to his apartments. He ordered another bottle of wine.

"When is your wife coming back?" Mrs. Masters asked.

"She spent last night in a police station—pretty business! I expect she'll be back in the morning. She won't come now. She hates travelling at night, besides if you knew her neat and tidy mind, you'd realize that she'd never come without sending a wire. She's like that."

They both drank thirstily, when their eyes met they seemed to hold a world of meaning, they laughed nervously. At last Mrs. Masters said, "I'm for bed. Good-night, it's been wonderful, Freddie."

He caught her hand. "Can't it go on being—wonderful?"

"It's so late."

"Time is standing still—for us."

She stared at him, they were both a little drunk, her eyes looked hot. He swayed towards her, caught her to him, and kissed her. When he let her go, she said, "All right, if you like. You know my room—be quick."

He entered her room as the Town Hall clock struck twelve, and half-an-hour later Grace's train slid into the station.

Now, he was going to have trouble with Grace. He felt injured, and badly treated. For twenty years Grace had always sent a telegram to announce her arrival, now—for no reason whatever—she neglected to do so, and—landed him in this mess. Grace and Isobel. How impossible to compare them! Grace so rigid, so difficult with her insane ideas about Votes and Rights; Isobel so delightful, so much a woman of the world, a woman of breeding. What ankles, what wonderful long, slim feet! Even the scent she used was—different. She said that it was made in Paris. Typical of her. Isobel wouldn't buy her scent from any tuppenny ha'penny chemist! Individual. That was it—individual. He was in love. This, he told himself, was the real thing. Isobel had teased him about other women.

"I suppose you've been hopping in and out of women's beds all your life, eh? Well, it doesn't worry me—I loathe amateurs."

He said, with a certain pride, that he had as much experience as was good for any man, and added, "Why not?"

"I agree—why not?"

He couldn't give her up, wouldn't give her up. After all he was a rich man, Masters couldn't get such a lot as Swathford's agent. Isobel had no money of her own, her father was as poor as a church mouse. He could give her many things which would be out of the reach of Masters, and he would give with both hands, be generous, lordly, behave like a prince. Jewels—a new car—clothes—he'd take her to Paris and buy her some more of that scent. The whole thing could be traced back to Grace and her precious Wild Women. If she had stayed at home, not gone cantering off to London to get herself locked up, he would never have spent the night with Isobel Masters, never! He wasn't the kind of cad who did that sort of thing when his wife was sleeping under the same roof; damn it, he knew what was decent and what wasn't. No, the root of the trouble could be traced back to Grace—there was no doubt about that.

He had been disgraced by his wife. Not a pleasant thing for Fred Forest, virtually the owner of the Hotel Majestic, to be in the position where other men could chaff him—about his wife too!

"Hello, Forest, your wife finished living at His Majesty's expense?" or "Well, Fred, how did your missus enjoy the skilly? Don't let her give the chef here the recipe, will you?" There would be men more serious-minded who would express their surprise and disapproval that he—Fred Forest—could countenance such a thing as his wife tearing about with the Wild

Women, the Shrieking Sisterhood, women who were unsexed. No, not a pleasant prospect at all.

He sighed and felt more contented. He would take a strong line with Grace, a very strong line—and he would not give up Isobel. He rose and bathed and dressed with care. Dark, dignified clothes, a tie which was restrained and expensive. He did not even go in to breakfast wearing his handsome dressing-gown, as was usual. He eyed it with a certain dislike. The damned thing had helped, indirectly, to give him away.

He entered the dining-room and found that Grace was there before him. He said sharply to the waiter, "You can go. I'll serve myself."

He took the cup of excellent coffee from Grace, and instead of sitting down took his stand before the fire. He looked grave.

"Good-morning, Fred."

"Good-morning, Grace." Then, after a slight pause, "This is perhaps the most momentous morning of our lives."

She looked up from the toast which she was buttering so carefully, her eyes met his squarely, her hands were steady.

"Really, Fred?" Then with sudden bitterness, "Nothing strikingly unusual has happened."

"That," he said, "is where you are wrong. I told you, before you went to London on this fool's errand, this piece of monstrous wickedness, that if you disgraced me, I should take very serious steps."

"And I told you, long ago, that if you disgraced me, I should leave you. I broke my word—to myself. I remained with you."

Fredrick drew a deep breath, this was sheer effrontery.

"That is beside the point," he said gravely. "My decision is still my decision, what I have said——"

With sudden irritation his wife interrupted him, "Don't talk like a second-hand edition of Pontius Pilate. Be real, Fred."

"I dislike religion being made the subject of cheap backchat. You disobeyed me, I forbade you to go to London, I told you that if you disgraced me——"

"You've said that once," she said.

"And I shall say it again!" His voice rose, he lost his look of complete dignity, his face was scarlet. "I won't keep a woman here who is liable, in spite of my orders, to make me a laughing-stock for all Sunchester. You and your damned Pankhursts and Kennys and the rest of 'em. If you don't know what *decent* men think of them, I'll tell you."

"And I'll tell you, Fred, what *decent* women think of—Mrs. Masters."

"Shut up!" he shouted at her. "D'you hear me—shut up! Mrs. Masters doesn't come into this. This is *our* quarrel—yours and mine."

"There isn't any quarrel," Grace said quietly. "I am going."

"Where?"

"Back to Callingly. As soon as possible, as soon as it can be arranged, and if your mother consents I shall go back to the Ring of Bells."

"To spread a scandal about me, to blacken my name, to make me out to be——"

"None of those things. Sunchester does not suit me. The hotel is too big, there is too much worry attached to it all. I must have more quiet. Oh, Wilfred Thirk will certify to that if I ask him to do so. I wish to go, you have told me that you intend that I shall go—everything arranges itself admirably."

Fredrick quailed. Possibly he was being precipitate. After all,

Grace was the mother of his children, people liked her, she looked well, had a pleasant manner with important guests, and could safely be left in charge when he was away. He might be away quite a lot in future—when he took Isobel to Paris, to town—it might not be quite so easy to leave everything to employees.

"Now listen to me," he said, "I'm not ungenerous. Promise me that you will give up this lunatic Suffragette business, and—I'll say no more about it. Surely it's impossible to spoil two lives for the sake of a mere whim, an hysterical whim."

Grace wiped her fingers carefully on her napkin, then rose and stood with her hand resting on the back of the chair, watching him.

"If there were no Extension of the Franchise for which to fight, I should still leave you, Fred. Can't you see that I'm tired of it, can't you see that I'm in danger of losing my self-respect, can't you see that it's inevitable that sooner or later the children, if they live here, will realise what you are? I don't even like you any longer."

"By God, that's a pretty thing to say!"

"It's a true one. There need be no open breach. I shall see you when you come to Callingly, you can come to see the children when they are at home."

"Home?"

"The Ring of Bells, I hope. I'm catching a train in half an

hour. My heavy luggage can be sent on. Annie will come with me. So—this is good-bye, Fred.”

A queer relief made him bluster. If Grace left at once, he might find that Isobel was still in the hotel. She had told him that except on hunting mornings she never rose early. He could see her again—soon. He could explain everything, make plans.

He said, “You’re leaving me, remember. I am not compelled to support you. You’re deserting me.”

“Have I asked you to support me? I have my own money and I can work for what other money I want. Well, good-bye, Fred.”

“What are you going to tell the children?”

“What I told you that I shall tell everyone else. They can make their choice.”

“I see, it’s all a mystery to me. I’ve always been a good husband, kind, generous——”

Again, Grace said, “Good-bye, I mustn’t miss my train.”

CHAPTER XII

GRACE

GLADYS FOREST wiped her eyes, and drew a shuddering breath. She had cried all night, because her mother was in prison again—had been there for nearly ten days now. Her grandmother watched her affectionately. Gladys was a fine girl, Elizabeth Forest thought, a brave girl, and a capable one. Grace was wonderful in the way she ran the Ring of Bells, but when Grace was away—Elizabeth sighed when she remembered how often Grace had been away during the past year—Gladys managed the hotel excellently. There had been some talk of sending her to a school, but Grace had found it impractical. Apparently people made no provision for girls to learn hotel business. Well, Grace had been a good teacher, no doubt about that. Gladys understood catering, she had spent three months in the kitchen, another two months in the private bar, and there was very little she didn’t know at the end of a year.

A bonnie lass too, well built, broad-shouldered, with a fine, clear skin and bright hair which reminded Elizabeth of Fred’s when he had been twenty-one. At forty-five Fred’s hair was thinning rapidly. He’d never have the head of hair that his father had, right to the day of his death.

Elizabeth bent forward and laid her hand on her granddaughter's.

"Nay, luv," she said, "maybe it won't be so bad this time."

"It will be worse," Gladys retorted. "It was bad enough before, but now they've brought in this abominable 'Cat and Mouse Act', it's—it's sheer hell."

"Aye," Elizabeth agreed, "it's a nasty, cruel business—a mean business. The thought of it makes me go shivery."

"Lady Bower says that the Act is a sign of weakness—it's the last ditch the Government have been driven back to. It breaks my heart to see mother come home, so white—drained she looks—so weak, only able to eat so little food although she's desperately hungry. Then as soon as we get her strong again—they drag her back again to that hell."

"Can't you persuade her to give it up, Gladys luv?"

The girl threw back her head, her eyes suddenly very bright. "I'd never even try," she said. "Mother knows that I only stay out of it all because I'm wanted here. I'm prouder of my mother than of anything or anyone in the whole world; she's magnificent. She's got such courage, it—well, it takes my breath away when I think of it. This is the sixth time she's been in prison—the sixth time! You're proud of her, aren't you, grandmama?"

Elizabeth Forest nodded gently. "Aye, I'm proud of her," she said, softly. "I don't say that a vote seems as important to me as it does to your mother and Claudia Bower. I've always managed to make my way without one—so has Claudia—I'm not politically-minded, I suppose. It's a cause to them, it's just another political argument to me."

Gladys for the first time seemed to lose her depression, she spoke eagerly, "It's not for people like you, or Lady Bower, or even mother—it's the others. The people who haven't the ability to make their way."

"Will having a vote help them?" her grandmother asked.

"Yes—because it will give them the power to have wrongs righted, it will make them able to demand consideration, they'll have rights as citizens, not merely the privileges"—she threw deep scorn into the word, "which men care to give them. The vote means freedom, Grandmama, equality, progress."

"I'm sure I hope it will." Mrs. Forest rose, a little stiffly, for at sixty-six she suffered from twinges of rheumatism. "Don't worry too much, my luv, she'll be home in no time. Meanwhile, you've got your duty to do, and your watch to keep, and—you'll do both, that I'm certain of."

She walked slowly back to the Royal Lion, holding her neatly-rolled black silk umbrella on her arm, a stout, elderly woman, with very bright eyes and a remarkably pleasant smile. Her face was unwrinkled, her hair only faintly touched with silver. Her clothes were well-made and obviously expensive, she had worn nothing but black since her husband died.

"I should feel that it was out of place," she told Miss Armitage.

The faithful Miss Armitage replied, "Yes—after all the dear Queen felt much the same after she lost Albert the Good."

As she entered the Royal Lion, Miss Armitage was waiting for her. There was a hint of excitement in her manner. "Father Forest is waiting in your room, Mrs. Forest. He came about half an hour ago."

"Oh—that is pleasant! Thank you, Miss Armitage. Tell them to bring tea at once please, and tell cook I want some of her small hot cakes. Father Forest does enjoy them so much."

Martin was waiting for her, he sprang to his feet as she entered, and came forward to take her in his arms. Elizabeth's first words were the ones she invariably used to her youngest son.

"My dear—you're looking very tired. Sit down—sit down."

Martin at thirty-four had broadened, he was very tall, and though still slim, had lost the hungry look which had characterised him as a young man. His mother had long ago become used to the fact that he had embraced a faith which differed from her own. After the first few weeks, when she had pondered over the matter with a certain hint of resentment, and a firm conviction that the "Romanists" had caught Martin in their toils because they felt he would be a rich man one day, she had grown used to his priesthood, and had come to believe that "after all, Martin seems a lot happier. He's lost that mooniness, he's always got a funny little story to tell me about some parishioner or other, and really when he talks about Rome—well, it's like reading a book or watching one of those moving pictures. Oh, yes," she told Miss Armitage, "we've had some long talks about the Pope—His Holiness, Father Forest calls him—and it appears that he's a very hard-working man. And a nice man, I have come to believe. No, if the Roman Church makes my son happy—that's what matters most to me."

"I suppose I am tired," he said. "I've been working hard. Oh, we don't lead lives of ease and luxury, Mama. But I've news, and I'm so excited about it that I must tell you first, before I begin to ask after the family—except that brave Grace. How is she? They've taken her back? Ah, Grace is the stuff of which

martyrs are made. But, my own news." He sat with his fine hands on his knees, the heavy lock of hair, which his mother knew so well, falling forward a little, his eyes shining. "The great ones have come to the conclusion that your son, Mama, is rather a clever fellow. They tell him that they have plans for him—wonderful plans. They like my book; did you, dear?"

"Oh—Martin—a beautiful book. I have it by my bed always. It's so simple, and yet—oh, I can't explain—it means a lot to me."

He laughed, "Don't burden me with your conversion at the moment," he said. "I haven't time to turn round, and I know you'd be a most difficult convert, Mama. You'd ask most profound questions, and expect immediate and completely satisfactory answers."

"Convert! No, no, Martin. I shall never be that, never. Mind, I've come to understand a lot of things, and see clearly about a lot more, but—no, I shan't be entering your Church yet."

"Ah!" He simulated profound relief. "I have time to breathe then. Let's get back to where we were, before you side-tracked me."

"Me side-track you! I like that!"

He took her hand and stroked it gently. "So did I, bless you! Well, I am to have time to write more, to preach more—they think rather well of my preaching, it appears."

"I did when I came to hear you in Sunchester. I don't mind admitting that I liked it as well as any sermon I've ever heard. I remember a great deal of it still. That expression 'The Bride of Christ'—it's a lovely thing to say, Martin."

"My dear, how nice of you to say that." His eyes shone with pleasure, and Elizabeth thought, as she did so often, that Martin, who was removed from her in his religious beliefs, in his way of life, remained closer to her than the rest of her children. His visits to her were the brightest days of her life; only she knew with what expectancy she looked forward to them, and treasured every memory of them long after he had gone.

He was speaking more gravely, the smile had gone, though his eyes were still very bright.

"... And so, Mama, the next years may see many changes for me. Wonderful changes—I am almost frightened when I think what may be waiting for me. It seems incredible."

She stared at him, her expression startled.

"Martin—they're not going to make you Pope, and shut you away in the Vatican, are they?"

The gravity left him, his face broke into smiles, and flinging back his head, great gusts of laughter shook him.

"Mama, Mama, what a delicious old goose you are! Now, tell me all about everything."

Only to Martin was she able to confide all those thousand and one things which worried and distressed her. He had been so wise, so understanding about Grace leaving Fred. He had listened, his face very grave, he had questioned her as to whether Grace wished for a divorce, and had seemed relieved when she assured him that neither Grace nor Fredrick had even hinted at such a thing. She had told him of her fears for Fredrick, that he was growing slack and caring too much for ease, comfort, and"—she hinted—"other things too."

He had volunteered to go to Sunchester and see Fredrick. Elizabeth had breathed a sigh of relief. Percy had dismissed the whole affair with the statement that "Fred's a fool, he'll come an almighty purler one day, will Master Fred." Eleanor had smoothed her fine silk skirt, shrugged her shoulders, and said that she had never really been very fond of Fredrick. Grace had said nothing, except that she was tired of living in a huge hotel, that Sunchester did not suit her—a fact which Dr. Thirk substantiated.

"But what will Fredrick do without you, Grace?" Elizabeth had asked.

Grace answered, "Mama, Fred can manage very well without me. He is entirely absorbed in his luxury hotel; he enjoys driving in a very expensive car to visit Gloucester and Brighton and other places. I don't want the children to grow up with the idea that the Majestic is a home. They'll get false values, they'll believe that they need do nothing for themselves, because there will always be a servant at their beck and call. If I can take over the Ring of Bells—and it seems providential that Mr. Grainger is going—you shan't regret it. Both James and Francis are going to the big school for hotel management and proper training in Lausanne, Gladys will learn from me."

Martin had gone to see Fred, and had found his brother lunching with a hard-faced, handsome and rather elegant woman. Both were laughing a good deal, and while the woman raised her eyebrows at Fred's introduction, "Mrs. Masters, my brother, Father Martin," Fred himself had seemed half confused, half defiant.

"Join us, Martin," Fred said, "best food in England at the Majestic. Adolf, another place for my brother."

He had fussed about the wine. Martin said that it all tasted very much the same to him, he had grown used to drinking either red or white while he was in Rome.

"Red or white! Poof!" Fred's heavy face showed his disgust. "I suppose you mean Chianti—loathsome stuff. No good wines in Italy."

"On the contrary," Martin returned, "there are plenty, if you know where to get them; Orvieto, Soave, Corvo, and a multitude of pleasant local wines."

Fred, leaning back in his chair, twisting the stem of his wine glass, smiled. "You priests do yourselves pretty well, eh?"

"With wine at less than tu'pence a glass, that's not difficult."

"And have a—good time, eh?"

"Yes, a very good time."

Fred laughed, and Martin noticed how the fat on his jaw shook.

"I wonder if it's what I should call a good time?"

"That, of course, I can't say."

They drank coffee, Fred and Mrs. Masters drank brandy in huge glasses, and again Fred fussed about the glasses being heated to some exact temperature.

"Lucky for me," Fred said, "I'm off to Paris in the morning."

Mrs. Masters looked up, her eyes wide with astonishment. "Are you going to Paris to-morrow? I didn't know that. Business?"

Martin watching her, thought that the surprise was over-done, her eyes were too wide, and surely as she and Fred had lunched together the Paris visit must have been mentioned. She added, "I'm going up to town to visit my aunt."

"We might travel up together."

"I don't know—depends what time you're going. I want to leave early."

Later when she left them together, Fred calling for another brandy said, "And to what am I indebted for the honour of this visit, your Reverence?"

"I think you know. Mama is naturally disturbed that Grace finds it impossible to live in Sunchester any longer."

"That's due to her health. She can't stand the place."

Martin said, "So Dr. Thirk says, I believe. Grace has shown us that she is not particularly concerned about her health, when what she believes to be her duty is involved."

"I should have thought that her duty was clear enough. To remain with her husband and not disgrace the family with a mob of howling women," Fred retorted.

"I don't think that—the family—feel that Grace has brought any disgrace upon them." The priest's voice was cold and even.

"They don't, eh? Then they damn well ought to. Grace took vows in a church, mind you, when she married me, and she's no right to break them. You, a priest, or whatever you call yourself, ought to understand that."

"And you, didn't you take any vows?"

Martin watched his brother's face become scarlet, he saw a pulse beating in his temple, noticed how a thick vein stood out on his neck. He thought, 'Fred's making too much blood. Eating too much, drinking too much. He can't stand it'.

Fred leant forward, and brought his heavy hand down on the table.

"Listen to me, I took vows and not a soul in the world can say that I've not been the best of husbands. A kind, indulgent father, and exceedingly generous to my wife. Keep out of this, d'you hear. Never mind what you think you know—you priests, Jesuits."

"Oh, I'm not a Jesuit," Martin said quietly.

"What the hell you are doesn't matter to me. My wife has left her husband, if you lived up to the teachings of your precious Church, you ought to go and preach to her, show her what her duty is. Mind your own business, don't come round here again. Nosing and spying around."

Martin rose, he stood looking down at his brother's flushed face.

"Very well—only before I go—one word to you. You're living too well, Fred. You're growing slack mentally and spiritually. Whatever mistakes you have made, whatever sins you have committed, you're on the eve of committing another and a very grave one. You're leaving for Paris to-morrow, and you're not going alone. Mrs. Masters is going with you."

Fred bawled suddenly, "Who the hell told you that?"

"She did," Martin said quietly; "she overacted her surprise when you told me that you were going to-morrow. She's not only wicked, she's stupid. Fred—don't do it."

For a moment the large, handsome room seemed to hold a silence which was almost tangible. Neither man moved or spoke. Martin's face was white, his brother's took on a deeper tinge of heavy scarlet.

Again Martin said, "Fred—don't do it."

The storm of anger burst over him, his brother sprang to his feet, overturning a chair, sending his huge brandy goblet flying to the floor, shivering into a thousand pieces. He faced Martin,

and raising his clenched hands above his head, shouted, "Get out! You sneaking, stinking Papist—you blasted priest! Coming here, asking questions, making insinuations. You're a liar. A dirty liar. Never come near me again. D'you s'ppose I don't know the way you and your priests behave—I've heard some pretty stories—I don't doubt that you've got a girl somewhere, hidden away . . ."

Martin stared into the furious face before him, he wondered for a moment if those clenched fists would descend and strike him. He did not move, his face did not alter in its expression, and when he spoke his voice was steady.

"Sit down," he said. "Fred—sit down. Don't let yourself say anything more."

To his surprise Fred sat down, falling clumsily into the chair which Martin had vacated. His breath was coming gustily. His shoulders heaved with the effort he was making to regain it.

"I'm going," Martin said. "I shan't repeat this conversation to Mama. I shall only say that you wish Grace to remain where her health is best. That you disapprove of her activities with the Suffragists, and that until this business of the Vote is settled, separation might save friction and distress to you both. Only before I go, I do say again, with all my heart, don't do what you contemplate doing."

Fred panted, "Get—out—get—out—quickly."

"Very well. God bless you, Fred."

"Keep your blessings for those—who want 'em. I—don't."

Martin told Elizabeth that Fred had resented his interference, and that probably it was better that Grace and he remained apart—for a time, at all events. "Don't worry, Mama," he said. "Fred's a very successful man, and if success has gone to his head a little—well, we must pray that all this will come right."

Yes, Martin was a great comfort. He might laugh at her, she might not understand this religion of his, she might know very little of the life he led, but he remained a great comfort. She said, "Another hot cake, Martin, you know you always enjoy them. And another cup of tea. You were always a great one for tea."

II

Grace was back. She had served the remainder of her sentence, and was no longer a "mouse" to be dragged back by the merciless "cat" the moment she showed signs of returning life. Percy had come to London with an ambulance, it had been waiting

at the doors of the prison. The little crowd of women, looking bedraggled and utterly weary came out together. They supported one another, two of them were almost carried by wardresses—one was Grace Forest.

Percy was an unimaginative fellow, but the sight shocked him.

'What makes them do it?' he wondered. 'Grace looks like a ghost, will be one before long if she goes on in this way. That girl there, she must have been pretty before she went into this place. That woman, must be one of the leaders—how those women at the gate are shouting! "Votes for Women!" Well, I'm hanged if I can see why not. By God, she looks ill. Done—finished—a hundred years old, she might be. It's pitiful.' He pushed forward, and instinctively took off his hat. Strangely enough the sight of the group of thin, sick, utterly weary women made his throat contract. They might be wrong, mistaken, hysterical—but they had guts, and you had to admit it.

The shouts of the women at the gate rose louder, "Votes for women." The elderly woman, supported by the wardresses, lifted her head, opened her heavy eyes more widely. They met Percy's, and scarcely knowing what he did, he said, "God bless you, ma'am, and make you better."

A voice so weak that it seemed a mere thread of sound, said, "Thank you—yes—thank you."

Then she was swallowed up by the crowd of women, and Percy turned to meet Grace.

"I've an ambulance here. How are you? Not too bad."

She smiled faintly, "Going home to get better—to fight again."

All the long way to the North, she lay still and silent. At intervals the nurse he had brought with him, gave her minute meals of meat jelly, and drops of brandy.

She opened her eyes, and whispered, "Mama's special meat jelly, isn't it, Percy?"

He nodded, "The Royal Lion special."

Grace sighed, "Oh, how badly I want a bath."

In her own room at the Ring of Bells, she slowly regained her strength. How she longed to eat, and how she resented the fact that her nurse refused to give her the immense meals for which she craved. Dr. Thirk, examining her nose and throat, noting the two teeth which had been broken by the gag, clicked his tongue and muttered, "Barbarous—disgusting."

Grace said, "And I had rather good teeth."

"I expect the dentists will be able to give you two new beauties," he said grimly. "Now—rest, and we'll get that throat and nose right." He was going, when at the door he turned and asked, "Oh, by the way, where are those lads of yours, Grace?"

"Lausanne—at the hotel school."

He paused, scratched his chin doubtfully, then said, "I'm not an alarmist, but I should get them home. Things don't look too pretty in Europe."

"Really?" She had been too weak to read, and knew nothing.

"Yes, the murder of the Archduke didn't help. Some folks are spoiling for a fight, and they may get it."

"Jimmie and Francis are due home in about ten days."

"H'm, that may be all right. I should see they've the wherewithal to get home before—if it's necessary. There, good-bye, m' dear. You're making grand progress."

CHAPTER XIII

GRACE

GRACE was better, she was able to go about the hotel, and though she was still painfully thin, she had lost the look of utter and complete weariness which had struck Mrs. Forest so forcibly when she first returned from Holloway.

Every day brought new strength, and Grace, going from room to room in the Ring of Bells, never ceased to congratulate herself that she had left behind the luxury and over-stressed comfort of the Majestic. This hotel was something which could come under the management of one person, there were no divided responsibilities, it was possible to retain the character of the place, and to preserve its individuality. Here a new rug, a fresh consignment of china, a crate of bright silver-plated articles fresh from the manufacturers was something of an event. Annie, delighted to be home again, would say, "Excuse me, Mum, but Number Seven could do with a new rug—unless someone's going to break their necks tripping over that bit as is frayed." At the Majestic the housekeeper, stiff as starch, would say to Fred at the morning conference which he held with the heads of departments, "Might I have an order for six new rugs, Mr. Forest?"

Fred, stretching out his hand, would take one of his order pads, and scrawl on it, "Six rugs—bedroom. F. F." and hand it to

her. She sent the note to the stores of the hotel, and the rugs arrived in her office on the sixth floor. Six rugs—no one knew or cared what they looked like, sufficient that they were the "Majestic" type of bedroom rug, thick, soft and very expensive.

Here, Grace and Annie visited the room which required a new rug. They held a long and enjoyable discussion as to how long the old rug had lasted, where it had been bought, and what price had been paid for it. The colour of the proposed new rug was argued over, and finally Grace would say, "I shall be in the town this afternoon, I'll go and see what Jackson has, and then slip into Bruton's on my way home. I always believe in comparing prices and values."

The rug was bought, laid in the bedroom, and to Annie, Gladys and Mrs. Forest, Grace would make the same remark, "Number Seven looks so nice with the new rug down—a great improvement, I think." Even the visitors would remark on it. Old Mr. Bromley, who had travelled for so many years for Stock and Rivers, the wholesale grocers, would say, "Scarcely know my room, Mrs. Forest. Quite smart you've made it!" Grace, smiling, would reply, "Ah, you've noticed the new rug then, Mr. Bromley." To which his answer was, "Couldn't fail to do so, Mrs. Forest."

New linen, covers which were sent to the cleaners and returned clean and bright—these things were important. Grace, going about her duties, smiled. Small things, a small hotel, but—after the turmoil of the Suffrage fights, how restful it all was.

She scarcely found any place in her thoughts for Fred. Twenty years ago he had been her idol, slowly that idolatry changed to mere affection, which in time gave place to toleration, and now toleration had been succeeded by intense dislike.

Grace had been brought up in a family where the idea that a man could be unfaithful to his wife and still retain her respect would have been greeted with scorn. Her father, Dr. Ben Harrison, had been kindly, rigid, and unfailingly upright in all his dealings, both public and private. Her mother, a large, mild woman with gentle eyes, had never had a moment's anxiety concerning him in all their married life. The nearest approach to a breach between them had been when he returned from a political meeting, and while filling his pipe said, "'Pon my word, Marion, there's a lot in what these Radical fellows say. If I were a younger man I don't know that the Tories would hold me."

She had stiffened, and replied, "Ben, I never thought to hear you make such a statement. You shock me."

He had assured her that he had no intention of joining the Radicals, but she had been disturbed, and her air of slight coldness lasted for several hours.

The thought of Fred's infidelity offended not only Grace's sense of morality, but her fastidiousness. The thought that he came to her when, twenty-four hours before, he had been with another woman, made her feel physically sick. This coupled with her fear that the life he lived might affect her sons, giving them false values, shattering the moral teaching which she had given them, had caused her to make a break, and begin a life of her own.

She had an intense devotion to her children, a devotion which they gave her in return. She had thought long and earnestly about the boys' moral welfare when they first left home to go to school, and somewhat timidly had spoken to Fred on the matter.

"Fred, don't you think that you ought to talk to the boys?"

"Talk to them?" he asked. "What d'you want me to talk about?"

She flushed. "Well—about life, and being good—about——"

"You mean tell 'em how to avoid getting girls into the family way?"

"Fred—please!"

"That's what it amounts to. Get away with you. I'll bet they know a good deal more than you do. I know that I did when I was their age."

"Then talk to them and find out what they *do* know," she urged. "I can't bear to think that they're either ignorant, or that they've learnt all these things in the wrong way, a low, furtive way."

Finally he had sent for James and Francis. He had lounged in his big arm chair, puffing at his expensive cigar, and said, "Look here—you're both going to a boarding school. See that you behave yourselves. Time enough to begin messing about with girls when you're twenty. I suppose you've heard about all that sort of thing, eh? And see that you both behave yourselves—in other ways. I don't want a couple of sons locked up in some lunatic asylum, which is where chaps land who indulge in a lot of beastliness in secret. You know what I mean?"

James' grave young face looked suddenly sulky, Francis flushed to the roots of his fair hair. They exchanged glances, James answered for them both.

"Yes, thank you, Father. We understand."

Fred nodded. "Good. Know all about babies, how they get born, and all the rest of it?"

Slightly breathless, James said again, "Yes, thank you, Father."

"That's right, and when you're both older, and when you feel that—well, when you feel you've got certain wishes, desires, come to me and tell me. I'll arrange matters for you, don't go running after some cheap tart, and think five bob 'ul see you through. Pay a decent price and then you know what you're getting. Safer, see?"

"Thank you, Father."

"That's all then. Be a credit to me—and, of course, to your mother."

They were dismissed, together they walked out into the long, wide corridor. For a moment neither spoke, then Francis said, "How awful!"

James nodded, "Pretty sickening!" then quickly, "Do you know all about—these things?"

"More or less, one hears things. Funny stories, postcards——"

James, his eyes staring straight ahead, said, "It's not true that chaps go dotty, y'know. But it's bad for your wind if you want to run or play footer. I'd give it a miss if I were you."

"Yes, rather."

That night Grace had spoken to her husband. He frowned.

"Good God, what a prurient mind you've got! Harping on this sex business. They know all about it—I told you they did."

"You discussed it with them?"

"Look here—I talked to my sons as a decent father ought to. I gave 'em the advice they needed, and now let's leave it alone. I hate talking filth. You women are awful."

She had gone to Martin, and, fighting hard to keep her voice even, had begged him to speak to her sons. Martin listened gravely, then said, "Of course I will, Grace. Only remember my cloth may make them afraid of me. They may think that I'm being pie—trying to preach."

Impulsively she answered, "Martin—they couldn't. They never would."

"Thank you, Grace. Very well, leave it to me."

That had taken place when James was fourteen and Francis a year younger. Martin had taken them to Glenfold Abbey for the day, and that evening, when they said "Good-night" to her before going off to bed, James asked if they might speak to her.

"It's a rather private kind of thing," he said, "but Uncle Martin said you were one of the bravest women he'd ever known, and told us why. He said there wasn't a woman in a thousand who would have gone to him as you did, to ask him to talk to us."

Francis said, "And we wanted to thank you. He was awfully decent."

James added, "And didn't make it all rather beastly, and dirty."

Grace watched them, their faces were serious, their eyes very steady, they neither stammered nor hesitated. What dear boys they were, James so reliable, so dependable, Francis more imaginative, and more mercurial. James rather heavily built, with thick dark hair, and strong capable hands, Francis slighter, with fair hair which only the daily application of cold water prevented from curling. Apparently, Francis regarded it as something of a disgrace to have hair that curled.

"I'm glad that Uncle Martin was so kind," Grace said.

Francis bent down and kissed her.[§] "Good-night, mother. We're jolly glad you're our mother. We would hate to have anyone for a mother except you."

They had returned from Lausanne five days before War was declared. James had enlisted at once, he had been in the O.T.C. at school, and thought that he stood a chance of obtaining a commission. He was already training on Salisbury Plain.

"I don't suppose I shall ever get out to have a smack at them," he grumbled. "Lots of the fellows say it will be over by Christmas."

His grandmother said, "My boy, they said that in the Boer war. It wasn't over for several Christmasses."

"This is different, Grandmama," he assured her. "It's a different kind of warfare."

Grace had watched Francis. She had never known him so depressed. The morning on which James left he went off on his bicycle and did not return until the evening.

He said, "I've done it! They've taken me."

"Francis—what are you talking about? It—they—what do you mean?"

"I've enlisted, Mother. After all—I'm only a year younger than James, and well, I thought it was worth a lie, in a good cause. The doctor said that I was well grown for"—he grinned—"a lad of eighteen. You don't mind, mother—not really?"

She did mind, she hated it, she was frightened for both her sons.

Francis said, "Don't look like that, dearest. After all, you went and did your job, didn't you? It must have been just as beastly as anything that can happen to us. You won't give me away, will you?"

She shook her head, trying to hide from him that her eyes were full of tears.

"No, I won't give you away. You must do what you think is your duty—both of you. God bless you and take care of you."

They both trained on The Plain, both got their embarkation leave together, and came back to Callingly. She insisted that they should go over to Sunchester to see their father.

"I don't suppose that he'll want to see us," Francis said.

"Of course he'll want to see you," Grace answered. "He'll be very proud of you both."

James sighed. "Let's go to-morrow and get it over then."

Fredrick was in uniform. They stared at him. A colonel.

"Yes, they've taken the old dug-out," he laughed. "Remember that I was through the last show—Imperial Yeomanry. Nothing new for me, this business. Of course, they let me down pretty lightly. I can't give my whole time to His Majesty—wish to God I could! Still, one does what one can, and wishes one could do more. This is going to be the last war. We're going to exterminate the Hun, that's the idea, extermination of the whole German race, lock stock and barrel. I do a good deal of recruiting, y'know. Developed quite a good turn for speaking. Give it to 'em straight from the shoulder. No mincing matters—plain speaking from a plain man."

He made them lunch with him in the huge white and gold restaurant of the Majestic. He introduced them to everyone, they could scarcely get time to eat, they were perpetually standing up to shake hands with their father's friends.

"Sir Edward—my two lads. Chips of the old block, eh?" or "Hello, Bagstock—like you to know my two boys—James, Francis, Colonel Bagstock." "Ted—ah, and Lester—how are you? See my two youngsters here—embarkation leave. Going out to show the Huns what England can do."

Francis said, "I don't believe that as a private I've any right to dine here with all these swagger people."

"We'll get you a commission in no time, m'boy. I'll speak to General Preston about it. Leave it to me."

"I don't know that I want one, Father."

"That's poppy-cock! That's an evasion of your duty. Educated chap, well-bred, decently brought up. That's the sort

of fellow England wants in the army as officers. No no,—you must have one. Can't have my son a private soldier."

James, watching his father, felt a faint sense of disgust. How he ate, showing such evident interest in his food, the wine he drank, and talking so grandiloquently all the time. I—I—I. So fat—with every breath he drew you could hear his Sam Brown creaking and straining. A roll of flesh showed above his collar, round the nostrils his nose was shot with tiny scarlet veins, his eyes were a little bloodshot. Yet James could remember when he had been a handsome man.

Fred selected a cigar, the waiter pierced it, offered a light. Brandy was brought, in a glass like a great goblet. Another waiter warmed the glass at a small spirit lamp. The bottle was lifted with due care and ceremony.

"A double," Fred Forest said. "Tell Ali to bring me some Turkish coffee. Like Turkish coffee, James?"

"I prefer the ordinary brand, father."

"Like your mother—no real taste in food and drink, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know—"

"I see that her precious Shrieking Sallies have made a truce—God, that's amusing!—with the Government for the duration of the war. Blasted cheek! Well, this might possibly get them the vote one day—which their insane beastliness would never have done. Gad, I loathe the lot of 'em."

Francis, flushing a little and inclined to stammer in his anxiety to do justice to his mother, said, "I heard Lady Bower talking to my mother the other day. She said that this truce was more than patriotic, it was generous. She—she said, 'They knew they'd have to give us the vote, of course. We'd got them beat. Now they'll give it and pretend we've got it being good children.'"

James laughed. "She said, too, 'Lots of people will believe that's why we have got it. The Government will say, "There you are, you little fatheads, that's what comes of being good."'"

Their father scowled at them, he was beginning to be a little drunk; more, he was rather bored with these two boys. Nice lads, but he hadn't much time for boys of their age.

"That woman Bower—well the less said about her the better. She's a mass of affected masculinity. Striding about, swilling brandy, cursing her workpeople—I detest the type of woman who apes men."

"Her workpeople are very fond of her, Father," Francis said.

"Her workpeople, m'lad, know on which side their bread's buttered. They kow-tow to her because she's the boss." He

yawned, and beckoned to the waiter, "'Nother brandy—no, damn it, a fresh glass, and warm it. God, I'm tired!"

James looked at his watch. "I'm afraid that we ought to push off, Father. Mother lent us the car, and we promised we'd be back in time to dine with Grandmama."

Fred nodded. "That's right. Never keep a lady waiting—sister, morr'er—aunt—sweetheart. Good luck to you—both of you. Here—got something for you—" He tugged out a pocket-book and from a wad of notes extracted two fivers. "Pocket money—I s'ppose you'll blue it on some French tart, eh? Wha'-marrer? Short life and a gay one. Goo' bye. Go' blesch you—both of you."

They looked back as they mounted the steps at the end of the great white and gold room, he was sitting slouching a little in his gilt arm-chair, his fingers twisting the stem of the huge brandy glass.

James said, "He's forgotten all about us already."

"He never really remembered us," Francis said. "We were just two of 'the lads who are going to show the Hun how to behave himself.' That kind of bunk makes me sick. Let's get home. You drive or shall I?"

They'd gone, they were fighting, Grace had only their letters and those painfully impersonal postcards. She worked harder than ever, hours which were filled with work passed more easily. Work seemed to drive out worry. While you worked you didn't wonder what the news would be in the next "special war edition." Gladys was a help. She could sometimes relax with Gladys, admit her fears, even say, "Oh, if anything happened to either of them! I couldn't bear it."

Gladys would answer in a way which brought comfort, though it might be vague, and didn't last very long.

"A man said the other day that he had read a book, called, *Thoughts are Things*. If that's so, Mother, the right kind of thoughts, confident cheerful thoughts might *really* help James and Francis. There might be something in it, you know."

Grace, wiping her eyes, would contrive to smile, and say, "Bless you, you're a great comfort, my dear."

Parcels—they all seemed to talk about parcels for the boys. Elizabeth Forest sent parcels, Grace and Gladys sent others, even Percy brought packets of tobacco, and sent a cheque which was almost alarming in size to a firm in London who would send weekly parcels of cigarettes. There was no talk now about "it"

being over by Christmas—Christmas was here, it passed and there was no end in sight.

Grace said to everyone that now Christmas was over, surely the weather would improve and make it easier for the boys out there.

Elizabeth said, "Aye, and about time too. Poor things, they say that mud is past belief."

Annie came running up the stairs, she burst into the room.

"It's a telegram, Mum. I'll lay any money as one of them's got leaf an' is cumin' hoam."

Grace opened the envelope, and read the message.

"No," she said, "it's not leave. Francis is killed."

For days she was dazed with grief. Nothing seemed quite real, except Gladys. Again and again when Grace went out, she found herself staring at young men; hate and indignation in her heart because they were still alive and Francis was dead. Letters had come from his officers, from men who had been his friends in the ranks, letters which praised him, spoke of him highly and with real regret. She would read none of them.

"Put them away," she said to Gladys, "when Grandmama has read them. I don't want to see them—some day I may read them. Not now."

Martin came to see her, he held her hand in his, and said, "My poor Grace."

She said, sharply, with a hysterical note in her voice, "Martin, if you've come here to tell me that he died gloriously, doing his duty, dying for his country, you can go away. I won't listen."

He said gently, "I could tell you all those things, but I'm not going to. Sit down and let me tell you what I'm going to do. I've always loved talking about myself, you know. You're the first person, except my superiors, who have been told. I have their permission, and—I'm going to join as a chaplain. You'll have to come with me to the Royal Lion and defend me against my mother's indignation."

"You're going out to France, Martin?"

"If they'll take me, and I don't think there is much doubt about that."

"Why are you going?"

"Because I think that it's my duty. Because I might be able to help some man over a difficult patch. It must be a lonely kind of business dying without someone near you to speed you with a cheerful word, to hold your hand perhaps, and tell you that

it really is—all right. Then again, when it's over—how can I speak about it all, with authority, if I wasn't there? How shall I be able to really understand the mentality of the men who come back, if I don't know what they've been through?"

"But your career, Martin?"

He smiled, "This is part of it, you see."

Impulsively, Grace said, "Oh, I do like you so much!" Then a second later, "I'm so desperately unhappy—my dear, dear Francis."

Martin answered her, speaking in a voice which was uncharged with emotion, he might have been speaking of the weather, of the latest book, of the news. "I know," he said, "it would be quite intolerable if we didn't know that it is only that they have moved on ahead of us. We miss them, and we do let our faith get dim, weak, then the misery is terrible. Only of course *they* don't feel like that about us, because they know all there is to know. They don't have to see through a glass darkly."

"You do believe—really truly—all you preach, Martin?"

"My dear, but of course. If I didn't I couldn't preach it, not to convince anyone, at all events."

"Where do you think Francis is—what is he doing?" Her tone was almost a challenge.

"I don't *think*—in the sense of imagining," Martin said. "The Church, you see, *tells* you things, she doesn't ask you to use your imagination. I know that Francis is perfectly safe—possibly at first just a little bewildered, and certainly very tired. I believe that for a time he will have every opportunity to rest, to get his mind cleared of all the horrors of the war, to get his perspective right. When that is accomplished he'll have work to do."

"What work?"

"How can I tell? It may even be his own work, hotel-keeping. If it's done well, honestly, as you do it, Grace—as my mother does it—why not? Be certain that whatever it is, Francis will enjoy it, and do it very well."

She sighed, "It must be wonderful to have such faith, to be so sure."

Martin nodded. "It is—I discovered that a long time ago. Well, it's not difficult to have faith—it needs cultivating, of course. Look at the time you spend with your bulbs and window boxes. If you think of it, a bulb—brown, looking withered, dry, and rather uninteresting seems an unlikely thing to grow and put out leaves and blossoms. Still—we buy bulbs quite happily

and with complete faith in them. As God originally made the bulb, so the greater includes the less, and we might surely trust Him as much as we trust—a bulb. Oh, we're strange creatures, aren't we?"

CHAPTER XIV

GRACE

GRACE had been watering her window-boxes. The air was fresh and yet filled with the promise of stronger sunshine as the day grew older. She handed the watering-can back to Annie, and sighed.

"My poor Francis—he loved flowers so much. I should always want bright window-boxes, because he liked them so. Ah, what a dear boy he was, Annie."

Annie said, with that queer grimness which among Yorkshire folks passes for sympathy, "Aye, both on 'em grand lads. Still, it's summater 'ave one on 'em alive an' doing well."

"I live in a kind of terror that James may go as Francis did."

Annie nodded. "They do say as the life of a—what'der they call it?—subaltern oot theer is three weeks. Well, ower James 'as done better nor that—opp ter now."

On the landing outside the sitting-room, Gladys came running up the stairs to them.

"Mother, a message from Grandmama. Father is at the Royal Lion, she wants you to go along and see him. Look, here's her note. Miss Armitage brought it. He's going to America, Mother."

Grace took the little three-cornered note. Elizabeth Forest had always folded her notes in that way; Grace remembered how years ago she had longed to learn how to do it. Remembered with what patience Elizabeth had shown her. "There! Now try to do it yourself. That's right. Now twist it—there, you've done it. Capital!"

In her spidery old-fashioned writing, Elizabeth wrote:

"My dear, Fredrick is here. He wants to see you. I felt that you might prefer a meeting here, in my sitting-room, to having one at the Ring of Bells. I should like you to come over.—MAMA."

She recoiled mentally. She did not wish to meet Fredrick. Inevitably such a meeting meant references to Francis, the expression of fears and apprehensions for James, Fredrick—

being Fredrick—would sentimentalise and grow morbid over it all. Why had he come to Callingly? Why did he want to see her?

She frowned, hesitated. If she did not go, Fred would make capital out of her absence. She knew his mentality so well. Then, squaring her shoulders, she said: "Very well. Tell Miss Armitage, dear, that I shall be there in ten minutes."

Gladys turned and ran down the stairs, Grace turned to Annie.

"Help me to change quickly," she said. "I want to look my best."

Ten minutes later she left the Ring of Bells. A tall, slim figure, with a small well-shaped head held proudly. She was dressed in black which in some fashion did not convey the feeling of mourning. She made her way through the square, into the Market Place, and passed under the portico of the Royal Lion.

Miss Armitage, from her little glass-fronted hutch, nodded towards the stairs, saying, "In Mrs Forest's room, Mrs. Forest, please."

Fredrick was seated near the window. He rose as she entered. He was wearing a suit of fine dark grey cloth, his tie was black, and decorated by a fine pearl pin. Grace, watching him, wondered how she could ever have loved him. But then the man she had once loved bore very little resemblance to the man who faced her now. The Fredrick Forest she had loved had been young, eager, his hair had been bright, his eyes had shone with animation and intelligence. He had been slim, and vital. The man who faced her was a travesty of the husband she had loved. This man was gross, with a pallid skin, and heavy "dew laps" at the jaws. He held out his hand, saying, "Ah—Grace. How are you?"

His tone, charged with melancholy, made her reply cheerfully, and in a voice devoid of emotion, "Very well; and you, Fred?"

He waved his hand towards a chair. "Shall we sit down?"

"Yes. You wanted to see me?"

He nodded. "You must be surprised to see me in civilian clothes. I remember the last time I saw my sons I was in uniform. I could see the pleasure in their eyes. I said, 'I'm an old dug out!' They laughed. Splendid lads. Keen as mustard. Longing to get out to have a cut at the Hun. I was arranging for poor Francis to have a commission. My friend, Lord Goring—" "Tubbie" Goring—was seeing to it." He sighed gustily. "Too late. God moves in a mysterious way."

Grace said, "Yes—quite. But why did you want to see me?"

He looked at her, his rather protruding eyes full of unshed tears.

"Yes—I appreciate that question," he said. "I am allowing my grief to intrude. I beg your pardon, Grace. A man's son is something to him which no woman can understand. I will be as brief as possible. After—after—this terrible blow—I admit that I went to pieces. Previously I had been one of the most successful speakers at recruiting meetings in the county. Afterwards—I couldn't concentrate, I was too sensitive to be able to hide my feelings."

Grace said, "You couldn't go and ask other boys to go out, and face the same death as Francis, is that what you mean?"

He glared at her, his face suffused suddenly with angry colour. She thought that it looked like the "Hunter's moon."

"Good God, no!" he said explosively. "It's their duty to go. Only I wasn't sufficiently fit to speak to 'em as I'd done previously."

She said, "Before Francis was blown to bits."

Fred shuddered. "I asked to be allowed to resign my—er—commission. That resignation was accepted—with the deepest regret—on the grounds which my doctor—Sir Samson Miles—put forward." He lowered his voice, "I was on the edge of a serious nervous breakdown."

He leant back in his chair and closed his eyes. Grace did not move. She felt that in listening to him, she was watching a play. A play which under other circumstances might have been interesting, even amusing. Now, it nauseated her. This over-fed, over-elegant man of forty-six, prating of his sufferings, his nerves, while James faced danger every day, while Francis—or what was left of him—lay in a grave "somewhere in France." She shivered, staring at her husband with disgust and something which was almost incredulity. Was it possible that Fred took himself seriously?

She moved restlessly in her chair. "Yes—and then?" she said. "I have a busy morning before me, Fred; I want to get back to work."

He opened his eyes. "Yes—forgive me. Do you remember Anthony's oration over the dead body of Cæsar? 'My heart is in the coffin there with Cæsar, and I must pause 'til it come back to me'."

She said, "Francis didn't have a coffin. I believe they're buried in sacks. Go on with what you want to say."

Fred uttered a sudden exclamation. "Pah! These Wild

Women have blunted your sensibilities. Grace, I hoped that our hands might have met above the grave of our poor boy—well”—he shrugged—“it is not to be. I intend to serve my country as far as in my power lies. I am going to America—the United States. Oh, ostensibly, on my own business, in reality to show the people of that great country overseas that their duty is to come into the war! No, no!” quickly, “I go with no mandate, I am going without official recognition—I am paying all my own expenses, but—in my heart, I go with as much high purpose, with as much intention as if I were Britain’s ambassador. This is my private contribution to—the War which is to end War.”

“I see. But why did you want me to come and talk to you, or why did you want to talk to me,” Grace asked.

For a moment the dull eyes cleared, she fancied that for a split second she saw the ghost of the eager, vital man she had once known. Fred Forest who could be trusted to put through any transaction and come out of it with the benefit on his side. Then—as if he had pulled down a blind, the eyes lost their brightness, and he settled himself more comfortably in his easy chair.

“I shall be away six weeks—not longer. I have an excellent manager, and he has admirable departmental managers under him at the Majestic. The place will run smoothly in my absence, but”—he waved a well-kept hand—“there is something still in the magic name of—Forest. The War will not, cannot last much longer. There is no doubt that America will come in. The French are magnificent, our own troops the finest in the world. Germany is crumbling now. The Majestic is the heritage of the son who is left to me—James. I want to safeguard it for him in every way. In my absence on business which is largely connected with the welfare of ‘this blessed plot, this earth, this England,’ will you give two days a week to the Majestic?”

Grace stared at him gravely, then suddenly flung back her head and burst into laughter. The transition had been so sudden—in one breath Shakespeare, then the blunt request that she would consent to manage the Majestic for Fred.

He said, “My dear Grace! Why the mirth? It’s not a laughing matter.”

She said, “Fred, do you ever stop taking yourself seriously?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Ah, then you never do. I don’t know. I dislike the Majestic. It’s too big, too elaborate. The Ring of Bells satisfies me.”

"But Grace—only two days a week, and"—speaking softly—"it's for our son."

She rose and walked over to the fireplace, standing there picking up one after another of the small china ornaments which stood on the mantelshef. She didn't want to be dragged back—for however brief a time—to the Majestic. How pretty the colours of that shepherdess's dress were. Dresden, of course. Claudia Bower said that she hated Dresden china. "Too damned sentimental for my taste." She had brought that little piece of Coalport back to Elizabeth from a visit to Scarborough. It wasn't worth the money which she had paid for it. Yet—if the Majestic were for James—not that she wanted James to have the management of such an hotel, he was too young, he might be dragged down as Fred had been—still, it was a fine property, a money-making proposition. If James came back—Grace shivered. Always this shadow of death hanging over the younger generation. No use making plans for them. She smiled—as she fingered a white Staffordshire lamb—she was enough of a Yorkshire woman to dislike the idea of losing money. She turned and faced her husband.

"Very well—on condition that I have your assurance that the hotel is definitely for James. Though, of course, Mama is the real owner. You can only make a request to her, a recommendation."

"Mama," Fred replied loftily, "has made over the place to me. I'm tired of being Mrs. Forest's representative. She sees that I've made good. The hotel is mine, my dear Grace. It has been mine since half an hour ago, when I signed—with Mama—the necessary papers before Amos Swan. Now are you satisfied?"

"You've made a will, leaving it to James?"

Fred sighed. "James is my heir. The only son—oh, what a tragedy. Is it necessary to probe and question in this way, Grace?"

"Yes, I think so. Very well. While you're in America, I'll go over to Sunchester for two days a week. Of course you'll inform your staff of this. Then good-bye, Fred, and I hope that you have a successful trip."

He looked at her reproachfully. She was a good-looking woman, and her mourning suited her. Her skin was delightfully clear, her eyes very bright. She looked well-groomed, completely mistress of herself. An attractive woman—he had always chosen good-looking women. His taste was perfect. Admittedly she was dull. Admittedly she had behaved disgracefully over the Suffragette business, and he had been very tolerant, long-suffering,

until she went too far, and disgraced herself and him—because he was her husband after all. He held out his hand, and took hers, holding it firmly in his grasp.

"Grace—if I stayed here to-night, can I come and dine? After all, we were fond of each other once. It's sad that now, when we have sustained this terrible blow, we shouldn't find some way of settling our differences, of healing the old wounds. I'm going to America—it's a long way from England—you're my wife—I'm your husband."

"When did you remember that?"

Reproachfully, Fred said, "My dear, I have never forgotten it."

"You're really ordering dinner at my hotel?" Grace said.

"Grace—couldn't I come—as a guest? Couldn't I—have something to take to America with me as a lovely memory?"

"If you order dinner at the Ring of Bells," she said, "of course it will be prepared for you. But not as my guest, and not—as my husband."

"But why, Grace dear, why?"

"Because I should dislike you as a guest almost as much as I dislike you as a husband."

He snatched his hand away. "My God, I don't know how you dare speak to me in that way. It's—incredible!"

Grace picked up her bag and gloves. "Good-bye Fred, and again—a pleasant trip."

He had swung round and was staring out of the window. He did not turn, and Grace went out, closing the door behind her.

II

Fred had sailed four days ago. Percy said, "And a damn' good job too—let's hope that he gets some of his fat off on the boat." Yesterday, Gladys had come to say that Captain Masters wanted to see her. Grace remembered how her heart had begun to beat very fast, and while she felt the rapid beats she wondered why she should care. She knew what Ivor Masters was coming to tell her, she was not in the least surprised, and yet she was forced to sit down for a moment and ask Gladys to bring her some *sal volatile*. She drank it, and felt the heavy beating cease. Her mind cleared too. She knew that she did not care if Fred had gone to America with Mrs. Masters, what disturbed her was that he had shown her so plainly that he was ready to come and spend the night with her at the Ring of Bells.

'If I had given in,' she thought, 'if I had felt that after all we might patch things up between us, he would have left me quite happily to go and join Isobel Masters. Oh, thank God that I was saved that degradation.'

She handed the glass back to Gladys, and smiled into her anxious young face. "There! I'm all right again. Send Captain Masters up here to me."

Gladys frowned. "Really and truly better, Mother?"

Grace nodded. "Really and truly. Now run along, we mustn't keep the poor man waiting."

Ivor Masters, late Captain in the First Loyal West Yorkshire Regiment, entered. He was a tall, thin fellow, with a sunburnt face, and a moustache which might have been cut out of mahogany. His eyes were small and brilliantly blue. Grace noticed that his wrists were fine, as were his ankles. His brown hands were sensitive and beautifully kept, his feet long and narrow, encased in brown boots, which though obviously past their first youth, were admirably polished. He wore a suit of rather emphatic tweed, a blue shirt, and a tie which Grace judged was that of some club or school. His lean face was wearing an expression of anger as he entered.

"How are you, Captain Masters?"

He glared at her, his eyes like bits of sapphire in his face. "I'm damned angry," he said, "damned disgusted, and damned sorry for you, if you're the victim of this blasted fellow."

Grace said, "Now, having said 'damned' three times, we might omit it from the rest of the conversation, otherwise it threatens to become monotonous. Why did you wish to see me?"

"Eh? You don't like swearing, is that it? All right, I'll watch my step. Do you know where your precious husband has gone? D'you know that my wife's gone with him? To America! I've suspected for a long time that there was something going on. Only you know what a plausible bastard—I beg y'pardon—fellow, he is. I'm not much of a chap, too easy-going, not a lot of brain. Oh, they pulled wool over my eyes all right! Isobel's always been a bitch—always. Only she's fascinating. I should have thought she'd got too much pride to go off with a second-rate, blasted hotel-keeper, even if he gives himself the airs of a bloody duke. My God, for two pins I'd go after 'em and give him the hiding he deserves. Anyway, I'm going to start divorce proceedings at once—at once. I'll twist Mr. Damned Fred Forest's tail for him. I'll make the pair of them sorry they ever

played this dirty game with me, by God, I will! I'm going now to Swan to get his advice about it all. . . . " He stopped short and stared at Grace. "Good Heavens, haven't you anything to say?"

"I haven't had much opportunity to say anything, Captain Masters. You did all the talking," Grace said quietly.

She realized that she was not in the least surprised. She knew Fred so well. Any woman—provided she were sufficiently attractive—was a magnet for him. She could visualise Mrs. Masters so plainly. Hard-featured, handsome, haggard, and reckless, with a character which was completely mercenary. Years ago, this man, standing before her now, must have been attractive. A young soldier, possessed of a certain gallantry of bearing. Then—she had heard somewhere, years ago—an illness—or was it an accident? His military career ended, and the Earl of Swathford, who was a distant connection of Ivor Masters' mother, offered him the agency of the estate, with a house. People said that he bought hunters, rode them with a view to selling them. That his wife did the same. Supplementing their income. Dogs—they bred dogs too. She knew the type. Well-bred, wasteful, always in debt, for ever trying to find some "short cut" to affluence. Living beyond their income, ready to gamble about anything. Accepted by the county, because they were "decently bred" or "come of good stock."

He gave a queer harsh laugh, a sound which held not the slightest trace of amusement.

"Sorry," he said, "but this blasted business had upset me. You see—in a queer way, I've been proud of Isobel. She's got the finest seat on a horse of any woman I know. It's—well, it's—been a shock."

Grace nodded. "I do understand," she said. "Sit down and let me get you something to drink."

He dropped into a chair, and sat staring at the toes of his shining boots. "Thanks. Whisky and soda, if that's all right by you."

She brought it to him, and he drank thirstily. Grace thought, 'He does that much too often, I'll be bound.'

Masters set down the glass and looked at her. "You're very calm about it, aren't you? Did you know about it?"

"I suspected. My husband and I have separated, you know."

He nodded. "I heard that. Heard that he chucked you out, over this 'Votes for Women' racket."

"I believe that he has made himself believe that he did," Grace said. "It wasn't quite like that, really."

"Over my missus, eh?"

"Perhaps—she was a contributory cause."

He said, his voice sulky. "Damn it, you might have told me!"

"My dear Captain Masters—really!"

"No, s'ppose you couldn't. Damn' hard on me though."

He finished his drink. "I wanted that. Shot to bits when I got her letter. Just like that—going to America with Fredrick Forest. Brutal thing to do. I say"—impulsively—"you know the feller—will he be decent to her?"

"According to his own lights, yes. He'll be unfaithful to her."

"Unfaithful! That's funny. There's a quotation about that—or something of the kind. About honour being rooted in dishonour, and faith—unfaithful keeping someone or other falsely true. I've often suspected that Isobel wandered a bit. Thought at one time that she was keen on Gervase Vane—heard some damned funny things. Once came into the drawing-room at Swathford—my place, y'know, not the Castle, and I'll swear there'd been something queer going on. They were——"

Grace knew that she had flushed, she held up her hand. "Captain Masters, I think you've forgotten yourself. I don't wish to listen to that kind of thing, if you please."

He blinked his eyes, looked suddenly stupid, as if he were only half conscious. "I beg y'pardon, Mrs. Forest. I don't know what tipped me over the edge like that. Unconscionable. I've not slept, and not eaten much. I'm honestly sorry. Damn' awful thing to have done. I'm ashamed of myself."

She rose and walking to the fireplace rang the bell.

"You're going to have something to eat now," she said. "A plate of cold beef, some salad, and no spirits. A good strong cup of coffee. Then you can go and see your solicitor, if you wish to. Of course, you know that Amos Swan is our solicitor, don't you?"

He twisted his thin face into a grin. "More complications."

"Baggot and Green are Lord Swathford's lawyers."

"Yes—might go to them. God!" with sudden violence.

"I hate it all! I was crazy about Isobel, Mrs. Forest. She was marvellous when I married her. We've been married seven years. I ought to have been a soldier still. Couldn't. Got a bullet in my thigh in the Boer War. Still limp a bit, even now."

They thought the leg 'ud have to go. It's held together with silver wire, screws and God knows all what. I was a pretty good soldier. Swathford thinks that I'm not a bad agent. Only it's not my game. Once a soldier—always a soldier. I thought that——”

The door opened, and Grace turned to give the order to the maid.

Then turning back she said, “Yes, go on. You thought that——”

“Thought that I'd make more money than I did. Dreams of running a few chasers. Nothing big, but picking up a bit here and there. Oh, I buy a horse now and again. Ride it to sell, so does Isobel. Heart-breaking job. Get to like 'em. Know 'em. Understand 'em, and then—they've got to go. Debts piled up. Oh, plenty of them my fault. I admit that. We got into a set who play pretty high. Drink pretty hard too. Rows started. Mind, I was still keen on her. She's a marvellous dancer. Plays a first-rate hand at Bridge. Then—oh, what's the use of going over it all. It's finished, and by God, they shan't get away with it! Fred Forest can damn' well—pay.”

“For what?” Grace asked.

“For what? For taking my wife.”

“If he pays will that make you regret losing her less?”

He scowled. “Don't try to make me promise to do nothing. I shall start proceedings at once. At once.”

“I know—I was trying to get your point of view,” Grace said.

“Now, here's your early luncheon or late breakfast, whichever you like to call it. Bring up the small table, Mary. That's right.”

Masters said, “It looks good. I'm sharp set.” As the door closed he said, “You're being damned nice to me. I'd no right to barge in and start off as I did. I've lost any manners I ever had. I do offer you my sincere apologies, Mrs. Forest.”

She smiled. “I accept them. Eat your food.”

Eating his beef, his home-made pickles, and fresh crusty bread spread with golden country butter, Masters looked younger, less aggressive. He ate with such obvious enjoyment, as if his hunger had forced him to forget the reason for which he had come to the Ring of Bells. Grace liked his hands, they moved with such precision, every movement was quick and exact. She liked too, his sleek head bending over his plate, the brightness of his eyes when he glanced up, and said, “I say, this is good! I didn't know you could get coffee like this in Callingly.”

He had finished and was smoking a cigarette, and drinking the last of his coffee, when Gladys came into the room. She was very pale, and with a hand which shook she held out a telegram to Grace, saying, "Oh, Mother—Mother—open it—James . . ."

Grace heard Masters set down his cup noisily, she opened the orange envelope, took out the flimsy piece of paper.

Gladys whispered, "Mother—is it?"

She held out her hand and drew the girl to her. "Darling, don't worry. He's wounded. It doesn't even say gravely wounded. It may be nothing at all. Tell Annie to pack for me. He's at Endell Street."

"You're going?"

"Of course."

Masters said, all the swagger and bluster gone from his voice, "I'm always saying that I'm sorry to you, Mrs. Forest. But I am, awfully. There's a train from Darlington at five but another from York about three. I've got my car here. Shall I drive you over? Save you hours of time and exertion. May I?"

"I shall be grateful. Gladys—you know Captain Masters, don't you?"

Gladys, wiping her eyes on a scrap of a handkerchief, said, "Yes—h-how do you d-do, Captain Masters. I'm glad that you're go-going to drive my mother over. Th-thank you."

Now she was in the train, being whirled away to London to see James. She carried with her the remembrance of Masters' bright blue eyes, felt still the firm handclasp, heard again the sound of his voice saying, "Now don't worry. He'll be splendid. You'll see. I'm a first-rate prophet."

CHAPTER XV

GRACE

As she entered the hospital the lines of some piece of poetry which she had learnt in her youth came to her. Obviously banal, but insistent. "Into the walls of the whitewashed halls, where the dead and the dying lay. . . ." Not that the "halls" were whitewashed, they were painted a drab chrome, the whole place reeked of disinfectants, there were nurses bustling about, anxious yet cheerful. Almost too cheerful, Grace thought, as if they made light of everything, made it all commonplace and

ordinary. Perhaps that was the right attitude, only it was difficult for anyone who had come to see their son to feel like that. She realized that she was in awe of these efficient, brisk young women.

"Lieutenant James Forest?" she said tentatively.

The porter gave her a quick glance, then turned his eyes back to his sheet of names.

"Lieutenant—James—Forest. Number forty-seven. Second floor."

"Thank you." Grace was a little breathless, she knew that she had feared that he might say, "Died this morning."

"How is he?" If only her voice would remain steady! The porter would think her hysterical.

"Couldn't say, madam. The sister 'ul tell you."

Meekly she answered, "Thank you."

The lift; the smell of anæsthetics was overpowering. Not that she minded that, it was all that the smell recalled. Men going up and down, suffering, apprehensive, fearful. Men sweating with the pain, men who had faced so much that a further call on their courage was impossible. Men who had gritted their teeth, who had grinned, who had even managed to crack a joke, while waiting for the theatre and the decision of the surgeons. The lift stopped, she walked out on to a wide corridor. She looked round, suddenly feeling helpless. James was somewhere in this building, waiting for her, all power of decision had left her. She stood there, incapable of making any effort.

A tall woman was coming towards her. Grey-haired, wearing a severe tailor-made suit, complete with collar and tie. Grace thought vaguely, that she looked like an admiral of the fleet. A nursing sister walked beside her, behind her came two more nurses in uniform. Grace clenched her hands tightly. She must know how to find James.

She stepped forward and spoke to the sister. "Could you tell me where I can find Lieutenant James Forest?"

The sister raised her eyebrows. "One of the ward sisters will tell you."

Grace said, "Yes, I know—but who are the ward sisters? I mean I don't know—I want to find my son."

The grey-haired woman held up a well-kept hand, with the short clipped nails of a surgeon.

"One moment, Sister. Lieutenant Forest—I operated on him early last night, didn't I? You're his mother, eh? He's going on very well. Yes, you can see him. He's out of the chloroform."

Then, more gently, "Remember we never sacrifice anything—not an inch—that we can save. We've saved his life—that's the main thing. You'll find him pretty weak, but cheerful." A sudden smile made the somewhat hard face beautiful, "Don't worry."

As if by magic one of the attendant nurses detached herself from the group. She said, "I'll take you to him."

Incapable of speech Grace nodded her assent, and followed the girl into a small room on the left of the corridor.

The nurse said in a mechanically cheerful voice, pitched rather higher than was ordinary, as if she wished it to pierce any mental fogs which might hang around the patient, "Here's your mother, Mr. Forest. She can stay for ten minutes. There you are!"

That was James—the elderly, grey-faced man who lay there, his head moving restlessly from side to side. A man with a stubble of beard, with eyes sunk deep in their sockets, those eyes dull and glazed. He sighed, a heavy sigh which was almost theatrical in its intensity.

Grace moved to the bed. "James—my dear—how are you?" She watched his eyes move as if seeking a point of focus, saw how he passed the tip of his tongue over his lips. Then a hoarse voice spoke.

"Hello, Mother. Nice—to see—you."

"My dearest—how are you?"

"Al' ri'. Be'rr'r to-morrow. They've done su-thing—my arm."

"You're not in pain?"

"No—no'in any—pain. Tired. A'f'ly tired."

She bent and kissed him. "Sleep, dear. I'll stay with you."

The dull eyes closed, he spoke as if sleep had already conquered him. "Ye' . . . go 'sleep. Be'rr'r t' morrow."

She waited until he slept, then on tiptoe, she crept out. The nurse was waiting.

"Miss Cruftford Drake would like to speak to you, Mrs Forest."

Grace said, "I don't know her. Who is she?"

Briskly the girl answered, "The surgeon who spoke to you a few minutes ago. This way, please."

The woman who had reminded Grace of an admiral sat at a meticulously tidy desk. She looked up as Grace entered.

"Sit down, Mrs. Forest. How did you find him? Tired, of course. He's been through a good deal. But we've saved his life."

Grace thought, 'She's the surgeon, she did what was done,

and yet she always says—we. She gives credit to everyone who worked with her.’

She said, “He looks tired,” then, impulsively, “James is such a good boy. You know—no, how could you?—we lost his brother a short time ago. Francis, my second boy.”

“Ah!” The calm grey eyes met hers. “This war is hard on mothers.”

Her voice was calm, but not unsympathetic. Rather, Grace felt, it was charged with so much feeling that it seemed ordinary. She had seen so much, this woman. She had come in contact with so much suffering, that she had steeled herself to speak of it easily, as if it were a matter of very little importance. The idea came to her, ‘She’s adopted this attitude in order to save her sanity.’

Grace, twisting her gloves in her hands, said, “James tells me that—you’ve operated on his arm.”

“Yes—we had to take it off. Thank God, it’s his left.”

Grace breathed, “You’ve taken his arm off——”

The surgeon leant forward over her desk, the big, capable hands were clenched; Grace fancied that she could hear the suppressed pain in the deep voice.

“Mrs. Forest—I have never sacrificed an inch of anyone’s body, when it was possible to save it. D’you think that I don’t *know* what it means for a man to lose his arm? Good God, that’s one of the hard things we have to face. If we’d kept the arm, your son would have died. Now—he’ll live. Years of life ahead of him—and let’s hope he’ll live them in a world without war. And”—the voice was softer now—“it’s his left. That’s not so bad after all. Remember we did do our best.”

“Yes,” Grace said. “I’m sure of that. Only—it’s a blow.”

“I know, I know. After all that’s what hits women so hard. It’s the arm you made. The arm you washed, looked after when he was vaccinated. Every bit of him is precious to you.” Then half impatiently, “Do you think we don’t understand? That’s why we’re all so—ordinary. That’s why we all seem to take it as a matter of course. It’s not that we feel too little, it’s that we’re afraid of feeling too much. If we allowed this horror to swamp us, take possession of us, our work would suffer. That mustn’t happen. So we’re too bright, too cheerful, we’re almost mechanical. If we were anything else”—she broke off, and as if speaking to herself said, “God, I’m so dog tired!”

Grace rose. “Thank you for talking to me,” she said. “I do understand. Thank you for what you’ve done for my son.”

II

James did not seem to be unduly concerned about his arm. He was philosophic, said that after all he wasn't a craftsman, and that he could run an hotel as well with one arm as with two. He laughed. "I've always hated cutting my nails," he said. "Now, by a dispensation of providence, I've only one hand to look after."

Grace, sitting beside his bed, said, "My dear—what an angle to take."

He progressed well, and after three days seemed almost himself again. Grace spent every hour with him that was possible. She longed to do things for him, almost resented the presence of the nurses. She wanted to take him home, and knew that she was annoyed when the doctors refused to allow him to travel. Finally, half angrily, she said to her son, "I shall go back to Callingly. I'm doing nothing here, except lose my temper and make myself disliked."

James said, "Get along with you! No one could dislike you. Still—I'm all right now. Just a matter of time, and I shall be out of it and able to come back and give you a hand." He laughed. "A hand, you notice I said. I'm growing quite a funny fellow, aren't I?"

So Grace returned to Callingly, and spent two days of each week at Sunchester, watching the huge hotel she hated. The transition at once amused and irritated her. At the Ring of Bells her staff were all known to her, she had talked to them about their private affairs, given them help when they needed it. The boots, the cellar man, the waiters—she had two and a buxom waitress—the barmaids, both good, pleasant girls, her four housemaids, the stout cook, and the kitchen women—even Sam, the barman, comparatively a newcomer, were well known to her. His mother had been at the Royal Lion in the linen room for years. Here in Sunchester it was impossible to know a quarter of the staff. They all knew her, and Grace often wondered what conclusions they had drawn regarding her relationship with Fredrick. They must be puzzled; equally, of course, they must know something about Mrs. Masters. They were all very civil. True there had been one moment at a meeting of the Departmental Heads when Mrs. Massinger, the housekeeper, had ventured too far.

Grace had ended that incident almost before it began.

Grace said, "Oh, Mrs. Massinger—these blankets—?"

Mrs. Massinger answered with civil dignity—almost overdone—that the blankets were cleaned for the first two years, and after that they were sent to the laundry. "Our own laundry, of course, Mrs. Forest."

"But you can't clean blankets and then wash them. It must either be cleaning or washing—not both. Anyway, I've no great opinion of the Majestic laundry. The blankets on my bed at this moment are a sight." She tossed her head a little. "You'd not find blankets like that on my beds at the Ring of Bells, I can tell you!"

Mrs. Massinger bridled. "Mr. Forest has always considered that our laundry was one of the best in the country. I don't know, of course, how you wash blankets at the Ring of Bells, Mrs. Forest."

Grace looked at her, steadily, smiling a little. "We wash them—clean," she said, "and fluffy. I'll visit the laundry this morning. Now, Mr. Bullet—what about those carpets?"

She spoke to the chef. "There's more stuff thrown away in this place than I *use* in mine. Where does it go?"

The chef shrugged his immense shoulders. "Zat ees deeficult to say, madame. Ver' deeficult."

"It shouldn't be."

"Ah, madame, in a grrreat concairn sooch ez zees—'ow can one man watched everysing. Ask yourself, madame."

"I'm asking you," Grace retorted. "If the waiters take it home to their families—stuff you don't need—I don't mind so much. In all probability they need it. But I won't have waste, mind that! You've always got the remedy in your own hands. Order less."

The chef shrugged again, his chubby hands raised in protest.

"I 'ave bin 'ere for ver' long time—all zees time Meester Forest 'ave naivaire complain. Always 'e say——"

She stared at him. "There is such a thing as being in a place too long. That can be remedied very easily, chef."

"Madame—nossing was furzer from my mind."

"I'm sure of that. It was in my mind. Please attend to what I have said. If you can't control your staff and avoid waste, then I must find someone who can. Good-morning."

She returned to Callingly conscious of a sense of relief. To go down to the kitchen and talk to cook was a pleasure. To find all the remains of yesterday's joints, stews, pies, puddings laid out for her inspection on the long, scrubbed kitchen table. To discuss

what might be served as stews, with the addition of some fresh meat, how that huge bowl of potatoes might be made into a salad, how everything might be put to a definite use. This was hotel-keeping as Grace knew and enjoyed it.

Always when she returned Grace said the same thing to Annie. "Ah—it's nice to be home."

To which Annie returned with a certain sourness, "Aye, Ah'll lay as yer reit glad ter 'ave left yon gert barracks of a plaace be'ind yer for a bit."

Then James came home, with his empty sleeve, his movements queerly clumsy at first, as if the loss of his arm had upset his sense of bodily balance. He didn't seem to mind particularly, only said that the fingers of the hand which wasn't there sometimes ached.

"I've heard other chaps say that," he told Grace. "I always thought it was a yarn. It's not, it's quite true. Funny, isn't it?"

She took him over to the Majestic with her.

He said, "I like our place at home better, Mother."

"This will be yours one day, James."

His face fell. "Oh, Lord—I'd hate it."

"Your grandmother has made it over to your father. He is going to leave it to you one day. It's a fine property, it's paying hand over fist, even with what I consider the extravagant way it's run. I could save hundreds a year and still keep up the luxury standard. To tell the truth, I'm beginning to be interested in the Majestic, but I should never have the personal affection for it that I have for the Ring of Bells; it's too vast, too impersonal."

"Oh, it belongs to father now, does it? I always felt that he wanted to be complete cock of the walk here. Well, God save King Fred—I don't want this place."

"That's not the way to speak about him, James."

He laughed. "Dear Mother—don't be an old hypocrite. You don't like him any more than I do, than Gladys does, than poor old Francis did. You've probably less reason to like him than we have. He's an inflated windbag, with a devilish good opinion of himself. And you know it, my dear."

He wasn't particularly interested in the hotel, it was obvious that he was glad to get back to Callingly. His grandmother made much of him, his Uncle Percy gave him money, sent him to York to his own tailor, and his aunt, Mrs. Benfold, loved to have him at her large, comfortable house outside the town.

Grace said to Gladys one evening, "James likes being at Aunt Eleanor's, doesn't he?"

Her daughter laughed. "James likes it because he meets Edith Benfold there. She's the attraction. She is awfully nice, and Uncle Joseph left her a lot of money, you know."

"Gladys dear! You're not inferring that her money makes James like her, are you?"

"Of course not; though I don't suppose it makes him like her any less. Why should it?"

Grace said, "No," but said it doubtfully. The thought that James might marry half frightened her, almost disappointed her. She had liked to imagine him growing older, like her brother-in-law, Percy. Unmarried, steady, hardworking and what was even better—enjoying his work. She had imagined herself and James going everywhere together. Fancied that people might comment, "James Forest 'ul never marry. He's devoted to his mother. Said the other night that he'd never find a girl who was half as attractive." Silly, foolish and she knew it, but—she sighed. Francis gone, James running after Edith Benfold, and Gladys—she might fall in love at any time. The future looked lonely.

Then one evening James came back from Greenlawns and stood looking down at her, smiling.

Instinctively Grace clenched her hands. She braced herself against the blow.

James said, "Mother, congratulate me; the finest girl in England has promised to marry me. Edith——"

She drew a deep breath. "My dear, I'm glad that you're happy."

"She promised to be married at once"; his voice was coming in gasps as if he had been running. "You see if we leave it, we shall be into May, and you can't have a wedding in May. 'Marry in May, rue for aye.' That won't do at all. So you'll help us to hurry things on won't you, because we shall be into May in ten days and——"

Grace said, "James, my dear, May is only thirty days!"

He laughed, "Oh, an eternity, darling. No, no, May is a splendid excuse for hurrying things along."

"You're impetuous, James."

Again that laugh. He seemed to have left years behind him. After his amputation she had thought that he was older—too old for his years. Now, he had dropped those years, he was like an excited boy.

"I'm in love, Mother, that's all."

Grace was flung into a storm of preparations. Eleanor Benfold visited her, she visited Eleanor Benfold. They both visited Elizabeth Forest. There were discussions regarding clothes, the location of the wedding breakfast, the honeymoon. Edith wanted to go to Scotland, James liked the idea of a motor tour through Devon and Cornwall. Eleanor Benfold, stout and complacent, with folded plump hands, laughed wheezily.

"Edith says that if they don't go to Scotland, she'll break off the engagement."

Mrs. Forest said crisply, "Edith would do better not to talk a lot of nonsense. I dislike that kind of light talk very much indeed."

Eleanor smiled. "It's only fun, Mama."

"Still, I don't like it."

Together Grace and Elizabeth discussed what James was to do. There were several hotels which he might manage, good openings, places where money was to be made, and where there were admirable opportunities for a young man and his wife to prove their worth. James appeared to be uninterested.

"I've had a gruelling time, Mother, let's face it. I want time to get my beastly nerves right, and to be happy."

"But," Grace objected, "having work to do does not preclude the possibility of being happy, surely. You must justify yourself."

For the first time she noticed how quickly his face could harden.

His voice when he spoke was crisp and sharp, there were heavy lines graved at the corners of his mouth.

"I imagined that I'd done that," he said.

"My dear boy, of course——"

"There doesn't seem to be so much 'of course' about it."

They were married. Edith was fair and handsome. Not pretty, her face was too characteristic for prettiness, her jawline too well defined. True her hair was beautiful, her skin perfect, but again and again Grace felt that her bright blue eyes were hard. She'd do her duty to James, she'd support him in everything, be a splendid helpmate, but—Grace wondered how much tenderness there was in this girl who had inherited a fortune from her uncle, Jos Benfold. James was radiant. His rather heavy face seemed to glow with an inner light, his cheeks were touched with colour, and his mother never forgot his face as he turned to watch Edith come up the aisle accompanied by old Amos Swan,

her guardian. During the reception, which was held at Greenlawns, James was in the highest spirits. He laughed at the idea of going to Scotland in April, said that they would both be frozen to death, added that having escaped the cold of Flanders he was now called upon to face the rigours of a Scottish spring.

Elizabeth Forest, installed in a chair which was almost like an informal throne, watched everything and everybody. She was resplendent in rich black silk, trimmed with valuable Brussels lace. The small, but perfect ostrich feathers in her bonnet had cost a great deal of money, her gifts to the bridal pair were numerous and expensive. It had given her considerable pleasure to view the presents, and to note the numbers of cards inscribed, "Gift of the bridegroom's grandmother." The dinner service of Bloor Derby, the canteen of cutlery—all solid silver—the generous cheque, the splendid Aubusson carpet. These were gifts worth having—worth giving.

The guests, too, pleased her. There was her friend Lady Bower—she had given the young people a dessert service which was unique—and with her Fernanda, Countess she was—she had been Madame Henri Pinto—looking like something out of the pictures in the society papers. There too were "the county"; Vane, Blattly, Sir Thomas Illing and the rest. There were the "City Fathers"; Dr. Thirk, Amos Swan, and the old mayor, father of Harold Wrench, who had been one of Fredrick's friends.

Elizabeth was sixty-seven. She found life was still very well worth living. This gathering was a proof of her success. The Forests' were hotel-keepers, nothing more nor less, and yet at the wedding of her dear husband's grandson, all the county were there to do honour to his family. Dear James, how happy it would have made him. Over there—her eyes rested with obvious pleasure on the figure of a man in uniform—a chaplain in the Forces. Her dear Martin. He had come back on special leave for his nephew's wedding, but Elizabeth fancied that there were other reasons as well. Martin was growing to be important, and how he was making Lady Bower laugh! This week he had been up to London twice. His mail was tremendous, she could scarcely remember anyone for whom so many letters came every day as they did for Martin.

He left Lady Bower and came over to where Elizabeth sat. "There you sit," he said. "Puffed up with pride; the embodiment of the Matriarch for whom everything has gone well."

She smiled, "Matriarch, nonsense! But it's been a nice wedding, and even you must admit that, Martin."

"I didn't see the actual ceremony, but this part of it is magnificent. Those presents—whew!"

"I can't help feeling glad, in a way, that James is out of this dreadful war."

Martin ceased to smile, and watching him she thought what a fine face he had. There was nobility in every line.

"Yes," he said, "it's a dreadful business. Only, remember, Mama, even in the beastliness of war there are bright patches. There's unselfishness, kindness, courage, and humour. Oh, thank God for humour!"

"You find all those things, Martin?"

"Indeed I do," eagerly. "I may have suffered since I went out to France, Flanders—but, how I have laughed!"

"And, when you find men who are wounded," her voice sharpened a little, "d'you try to make them become Catholics?"

"No, no—that isn't possible. I wonder if I should, even if it were. There's no time for arguments, for involved doctrinal teaching, all one can do is to repeat what Monsignor Benson says—that Death after all is only the beginning of Life. It's just a word, a reassurance, a shake of the hand and—au revoir, and bon voyage."

She pursed her lips. "It sounds casual to me."

"Ordinary," Martin said, "never casual. Ah, here is the bride ready to depart in a shower of rice and confetti. Come, Mama."

CHAPTER XVI

GRACE

GRACE was talking to Ivor Masters. He came into the Ring of Bells three or four times a week. The sight of him amused her. Standing there in the small private bar, dressed in immaculate riding breeches, and boots which were polished until they were the colour of a ripe horse chestnut, he looked so different from the townsmen who gathered there. There was something about him that appealed to her. Not that he was clever—she doubted if he ever had read a book, excluding a few detective novels, in his life. She deplored his habit of swearing, using the sanguinary adjective far more often than was necessary—if indeed it was ever necessary. He drank quite as much if not more than was

good for him. And yet—when those astonishingly bright blue eyes met hers she felt that she faced someone who would be a real friend, should the necessity ever arise.

They never exchanged much conversation.

"Good-morning, Captain Masters."

"G'morning, Mrs. Forest." Then if it were a wet morning he would add, "Grand growing weather," and if the day were fine, "Nice to see a bit of sunshine."

Her reply was invariably, "Yes, indeed," and with that she passed on about her business, but the tone of his voice, the remembrance of those clear eyes and slim brown hands remained with her.

Gladys said, "Captain Masters is nice, isn't he, Mother? That's the kind of man I'd like to marry. Wouldn't you?"

Grace smiled, "I am married, Gladys."

"Oh, yes, I know, but not to a man like that."

She went over to the Royal Lion one morning, to tell Elizabeth that James had written, filled with enthusiasm for the Highlands, the scenery, and the good food. They were completely happy, he said. Edith grew more charming every day, life was wonderful. She had not known that James could wax so expansive.

Elizabeth read the letter, folded it and handed it back.

"Very nice, very nice indeed. Dear children, both of them. And I have news. Fredrick is sailing from New York. He hopes to be home in about a week or ten days after sailing. Oh, Grace, my dear, if only you and he could settle your differences!" Then, rather wistfully, "Do you think that you might come together again, Grace dear?"

"Mama, I can't say. I don't know—frankly. I don't think so."

Elizabeth sighed. "It's such a waste. You're both still young people. Fredrick is only forty-six and you're two years younger."

Grace thought as she walked home, 'I'm forty-four. Not young any longer. I couldn't go back to Fred. It would be impossible. And yet I know that I should like to be the centre of a man's world'—then quickly her thoughts rebuked her—'not *any* man, only the right man.'

That night, when they had finished dinner, Annie came to say that Captain Masters would be glad if he could speak to her. Gladys was out at the theatre. Grace thought, 'Then he knows that his wife is coming home', and before she could control those thoughts they galloped forward. 'She's coming home, he's going to take her back. I can't bear it!'

Annie, clicking her tongue, said, "Tach! Will yer see 'im, Mum?"

"Yes, I'll see him."

She rose, changed the position of a vase of flowers on the mantelpiece, shook up two cushions on the sofa, and switched on another light. It was a pleasant room, sufficiently large, and possessing an air of dignified comfort. There was nothing particularly original there, the furniture was Victorian, mellowed with age and much polishing. Everything was good without having any great value. It looked what it was, the room of a woman with considerable ideas regarding comfort, but who lacked the desire to change the style of her room from solid dignity to experimental attractiveness. Grace clung to her photographs in expensive, if out-dated, silver frames, she liked her water-colour paintings of Fountains Abbey, Knaresborough Castle and York Minster, she refused to banish her china cabinet, even though its contents were of little value.

Glancing round quickly, she thought, 'It's a nice room. I don't care what anyone says.'

Annie, opening the door, said, "Captin Masters, Mum."

He came forward. She missed the familiar riding breeches, the boots, and found him singularly attractive in his suit of dark blue, with the relief of a bright striped tie.

"This is a pleasant surprise, Captain Masters."

He frowned, and she thought, 'Something has annoyed him, I wonder what it is?'

"I don't know about it being pleasant," he said. "I've heard that Isobel is coming back—on the same ship, I'll warrant, as your husband."

"Then they'll be back in England in about a week? My mother-in-law, told me that this morning."

Masters nodded. "That 'ul be it. Well—what d'you want me to do? I've never been to my lawyers, you know. Waited until I could pluck up courage to speak to you about it."

"Do?" Grace repeated. "You mean about the divorce?" Then realising that they were both standing, she asked him to sit down, adding, "You'll have something to drink?"

"Whisky and soda, if that's all right." She busied herself with the preparations. Decanter—old and well cut, soda water and a splendid glass goblet. She only had three of them. Waterford. If you held them to the light you could catch the faint bluish tinge in the glass. She set the small tray—a George III silver salver—on the table at Masters' elbow.

He glanced at the tray. "That's nice. I'm fond of silver. Got one or two niceish bits. The glass too—a beauty, isn't it? You like nice things, eh?"

"Yes, I like them. Now—go on about this unpleasant business."

"That's right. As I said, I didn't want to do anything that might annoy you. Been thinking things over. Thinking a devil of a lot. Mostly—let's face it—about you."

She wondered if he could see that her hands were shaking? Not that she was frightened. She was facing something unexpected, and yet she knew that he was going to speak of those matters on which she had only half-consciously thought. Looking back, she scarcely knew what her own thoughts had been. Nothing concrete, nothing definite. All that she knew was that they had been about Ivor Masters. Even then not actually about him. They had been too vague for that. She had visualised his hands, those slim wrists, the way his hair grew, she had remembered the little scar on his jaw, which showed so startlingly white when he was cold. Now he said that he had been thinking about her.

Controlling her voice she said, "About me, Captain Masters?"

He nodded. "Yes. I don't know why—not exactly. You're not the kind of woman I ever felt would attract me. Confound it, I've only spoken to you half a dozen times. I've always liked women who rode, who were decent shots, who liked following hounds and who didn't turn white when the fox was thrown in." He looked up, his expression truculent. "I don't mind laying a fiver you've never been able to watch a fox thrown in to the hounds, have you?"

"I've never hunted, but I'm sure that I should hate it."

"Umph! I knew it. Now, I don't doubt that I can get rid of my wife, can make Forest pay up, and heavily. The point is—how d'you feel about it?"

Grace closed her eyes for a second. What a crazy conversation this was! He had been thinking about her. She wasn't his type of woman. She wouldn't like to watch hounds tear a fox to pieces. She couldn't shoot. Now—she was to decide whether Masters should divorce his wife or not. Vaguely she thought, 'It's like "Alice In Wonderland"!' "

"Well?" he said sharply. "How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know—I can't tell you."

He moved his head impatiently. "I've got to know! I won't take Isobel back. That's definite. I'm through with that. The point is—if you get rid of him, and I get rid of her—would you marry me?"

Again she said, "I don't know." Then recovering herself, "But, Captain Masters, this is fantastic. You don't know me. We can't continue this conversation, it's preposterous. Please—let us leave it."

Masters rose, he walked to the little cupboard where she kept her glasses, opened it and brought a glass back.

"You're shaken to bits," he said. "You want a drink. Oh, yes, you do," as she protested. "That's not strong, it 'ul make you see things more clearly. Drink it down." Then as she sipped it, shivering because she had always hated the taste of whisky, "That's better. Don't sip it, drink it. Y' see, there are certain to be difficulties. Can't avoid that. Forest's been unfaithful to you, and my wife's been unfaithful to me. I worried it out. If I give Isobel grounds for divorce—faked stuff, of course, and you like to divorce Forest—I gather you've plenty of grounds—will you marry me? Will that make people talk less? I don't give a damn what they say about me, but I won't have you worried. That's the point we've got to consider, m' dear."

"But—but—I don't even know that I want to marry you."

"Oh!" His voice was so flat, so like a schoolboy who has suffered a disappointment, who has been denied something on which his hopes were set, that Grace smiled. "Oh!" Then hopefully, "You don't dislike me, do you?"

"There's a great difference between not disliking a man and wanting to marry him."

"Yes—I know that. Still, do you think that you could like me?"

Grace said, "Captain Masters, don't you think that this conversation has been going on long enough? I do. I am—I say this and mean it—honoured that you should feel as you apparently do."

He said, "*Apparently!* I damn' well *do* feel like that."

"But I don't think that we can discuss it. You must do what you think is right, what you think will be for your ultimate happiness."

He stared, and Grace felt a momentary sense of irritation. He was stupid, this man, and yet her irritation, she knew, was more the feeling she might have felt for a child, who was not using its wits. She longed to speak to him as Miss Trotwood would have spoken to Mr. Dick.

He said, "You mean about you? But I know what would be my—what did you say?—ultimate happiness. I've told you."

"No, no. Regarding this unpleasant business of divorce——"

"Well, what do you think?"

She thought, 'Is he really being stupid, dense on purpose, or is it that he is actually puzzled about it all?'

"Listen to me," she said, "you're not a child, you're a man. What you decide to do rests with you. I cannot possibly advise you. You must see that surely."

"I don't know that I do—still if I'm annoying you there's no more to be said. I'd better go. I'll send you a line as to what I think 'ul be the best course to pursue." He picked up his hat and gloves and was turning away, when something made him come back to her. He took her hand in his. Grace was grateful that he did not press it, that he only held it firmly, conventionally. "It may seem all mad to you," Masters said, "but it's the realest thing that has ever happened to me. Do you believe that?"

"I've said that I am honoured." She was growing almost hysterical with the conversation; the unreality of it made her feel that she was living through some wild dream. "I can't say any more. Don't bother me, Captain Masters—I don't want to be worried."

He dropped her hand. "Sorry—I'm awfully sorry. Good-bye. I'll write to you."

She thought about him a great deal. There were times when she found herself smiling at the recollection of the ridiculous interview. Then she rebuked herself, repeating that no one had a right to laugh at sincerity. Then she argued—how could Masters be sincere? He scarcely knew her. They had only met alone twice, the rest of their conversations had been restricted to conventional greetings, brief comments on the weather and the like. Again and again she said, 'But he doesn't know me, I don't know him. Don't even know that I wish to. He isn't the kind of man I understand. He's one of a set who are outside my ken. I've made one mistake, I shan't risk making another. At all events the idea of my marrying anyone is incredible. I'm forty-four. The whole thing is laughable. I must forget it.'

For all her arguments, all her reasoning, she knew that she found it impossible to forget the interview. She became tolerant with herself. She was a woman, and women who were middle-aged often nursed small and sentimental romances. Half of them were imaginary. They hated to realise that their youth was over, and clung to any scraps of evidence to prove that their attraction was still existent. There were times when she decided that the whole interview with Ivor Masters had been a figment of her

imagination. Women of her age frequently had queer ideas, fancies—became almost hysterical. Then came the swing of the pendulum, and her common-sense asserted itself.

‘Don’t be a fool, my girl! Of course it all happened. He’s the kind of man who must have a woman to admire, must be able to talk about “my wife” and all the rest of the jargon. She’s left him, chance threw him my way, and he’s lazy. I was on the spot, I’m not bad-looking, it’s pretty evident that I’m moderately successful, and I’ve a certain amount of money. Therefore—he felt that I’d do.’

Yet even that argument did not settle the question for Grace, because she was an honest person, and knew that her theory didn’t fit in with what she knew of Masters, and that was little enough. So as the days passed, she found that she was allowing all her reasons, and ideas, and speculations to die natural deaths, and only thinking at intervals that he had looked rather pathetically taken aback, and that even if he were stupid—as she didn’t doubt for one moment he was—he had been kind and helpful when James was wounded. She remembered that his hand had felt cool and firm, that his queer little moustache looked as if it were carved out of a bit of mahogany, that—then she would grow half angry, half amused with herself, smile and think, ‘Grace, my dear, don’t behave like a sentimental schoolgirl. You’re almost on the verge of having a “pash” on this wretched man, as you did on the games mistress when you were fifteen. You’re turned forty, and that’s putting it kindly, your body is growing thick, you’re perilously near being “wide in the beam.” You’ve a married son, and a grown-up daughter.’

He wrote, a queer stiff little note.

“My dear Mrs. Forest, I have seen my solicitors. They are considering the matter which we discussed. I mean regarding my wife and your husband. I await their decision and will communicate with you again. Please believe me to be, yours faithfully, Ivor G. Masters.”

He had been over-generous with his s’s in one word, and had transposed the c and the s in “decision.” Grace smiled.

II

Grace did her best to visit Elizabeth Forest every day. She had always been fond of the older woman, she both liked and respected her, trusted her judgment, and congratulated herself that affection had always existed between them.

She enjoyed listening to her mother-in-law recounting her weekly impressions gathered at the various Forest Hotels. How poor Herbert Crowther at Forchester was growing old, and could not be expected to remain there much longer. "Not that he won't live for years," Mrs. Forest said, "but the Grand is growing too much for him. He's never taken kindly to the new order of things. He's saved, he'll be able to live in great comfort, but he admits that his work is getting too much for him. Sixty-nine, Grace, it's a considerable age. I suggest that he hands over to Godfrey, his eldest lad. Lad! Well, he's forty. Gloucester and Brighton worry me. Oh, they pay all right. Hartley at Gloucester is a good man, and that nice little man, Bassinetti, at Brighton couldn't be bettered. Italian he may be, but he's a worker. Still—their reports worry me a bit. They're both so good, so careful. They send me pages and pages every week. I shall be glad when Fredrick is back." She slanted her keen eyes in Grace's direction, and repeated the words, "I shall be glad when Fredrick is back."

"I am sure that you will be, Mama."

"You've not thought any more about what I said the other day, have you, Grace?"

Grace instinctively clasped her hands. She was going to hurt this kindly old woman, and she hated having to hurt anyone.

"Mama—it's not only that I don't think that I could ever live with Fred again, but I don't think that Fred wants, in the very least, to live with me."

"Ah!" The tone of the exclamation made Grace realise that Mrs. Forest had been waiting for the confirmation of what she had feared. She was not surprised, she had hoped against hope that what she dreaded were not true, she had tried to reason against the possibility of Fredrick having been openly unfaithful to his wife, and now she knew. Her fears were ended. Their place might be taken by anger, disgust, disappointment, but at least she knew what she had to face. Her tone, when she spoke, held relief.

"You mean," she said, leaning forward a little, and lowering her voice as if even to speak of such matters was distasteful to her, "that Fredrick has—gone off with someone else?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Did they go to America together?"

Grace nodded. "I believe so."

"Are they returning on the same ship?"

"Yes, Mama—so far as I know."

"And is the woman, the trollop with him, the person I imagine her to be, the wife of Swathford's agent?"

"Yes, Mama."

Again that long-drawn exclamation, "A-a-ah! She is not the first, is she? I thought not," as Grace shook her head. "Did you resent the others, my dear?"

"Resent! Of course I did, but there were always promises, Fred was invariably penitent, and in the early days the children were so young, and I suppose I was dreadfully in love with Fred, and hopeful. I believed him, I even fancied that he was, as he said himself so often, more sinned against than sinning. Perhaps the first really serious affair was with Mrs. Walker; do you remember her?"

Elizabeth said grimly, "Mrs.—Matt—Walker! A fly-by-night if ever there was one."

"The others had been odd flirtations, a night spent with a barmaid when I was away from home, a few kisses snatched from housemaids, and so on," Grace continued, "until it all culminated in this more or less open affair. I—couldn't go back, Mama, even if Fred wished me to do so."

"Poor Fredrick—he could never really tell wheat from chaff. He's failed us, Grace. Flung the love we gave him back in our faces. You weren't sufficiently flashy. I've been for years an old woman who has done pretty well, and could be badgered into giving him the Majestic. That was Fredrick's ambition—to be what he called 'master in his own place, not the representative of Elizabeth Forest.' I wonder what he'll do. Face a divorce? Have you any idea what Captain Masters feels about it? Does he *know* anything?"

Grace answered, very quietly, "Yes—he knows. He came to see me about it all. Twice. Once the day that we heard James was wounded. He drove me to York to catch the express. He was—very kind."

"Claudia Bower says that he's a gentleman; he looks something of a hell-rake to me. Seems a queer thing to do—to come and discuss the matter with you! What's wrong with going to Amos Swan? It's not a woman's business to talk about divorce with a strange man. I must say I'm surprised."

"He was very kind, Mama." Grace thought that the words sounded particularly ineffective after she had spoken them.

"Oh, kind," Elizabeth exclaimed. "Anyone can be kind. It's not the right way to go on. Coming to tell you about his wife and your husband. It's—loose, somehow, Grace." She sighed

heavily. "Oh, my dear—I mind so well the day that Fredrick brought you to see me, to tell me that you were engaged. That was in 1890—yes. He said that I hadn't lost a son, and that I had gained a daughter. Well, he was only partially right. I *have* lost my son. I've been losing him for years. At this moment I say from the bottom of my heart—thank God my dear husband is dead. This would have killed him. I remember him at your wedding—you remember we lost him two months after your James was born—a model of uprightness and integrity. My dear James—I'm glad that you named your own boy after him. Well—I lost Fredrick, lost my son, but I gained a daughter. He was right there. You've never given me a moment's anxiety, my dear, not even when you went off to try to get a vote. I knew then that you were doing what your conscience told you was right. Claudia Bower said, 'She's following her star, don't try to hold her back, Elizabeth'." She put out her hand and laid it on Grace's. Looking up Grace saw that the clear eyes were full of unshed tears.

"Mama—don't!" she cried quickly.

"No, no—it's all right. Just a regret for all that might have been and hasn't been. Grace, rely on me for all the help I can give you. I shall tell Fredrick when he comes home exactly how I feel. There, my dear daughter, let us talk no more about it."

Someone knocked on the door. Grace, afraid that the eyes of a servant might notice Mrs. Forest's tear-stained eyes, went to open it. "Yes, Ellen?"

"Could you come down and speak to a gentleman, Mrs. Fredrick?"

"You mean you want me to come down, not Mrs. Forest?"

"No, you, if you please, Mum."

"Very well." Over her shoulder she said to Elizabeth, "I shan't be a moment. Shall Ellen bring tea? Yes, bring tea up, Ellen."

As she ran down the shallow stairs, Grace wondered for one wild moment if the "gentleman" might be Ivor Masters? It was impossible, he would never come to the Royal Lion to find her. What a fool she was to imagine such things! In the hall Miss Armitage was waiting.

"Mrs. Fredrick, Captain Masters is in the little smoke-room. Mr. Percy has just come in. He's with him. They want you."

Grace frowned. "Nothing wrong, is there?"

Miss Armitage shook her head. "Oh, Mrs. Fredrick—go to them please."

She entered the small smoke-room, the oak panelling of which

was such a source of pride to Elizabeth Forest. Masters stood with his arms folded on the mantelshef; Percy, his hands clasped behind him, stood staring out of the window, his back to the door. Grace stood watching them for a second, her heart beating wildly.

"Percy—Captain Masters—what is it?"

They both turned towards her, Percy's long, plain face was white, Masters' was grey under his tan, his moustache looked more unreal than ever. He tried to speak, his lips moved but Grace could hear no sound. Percy came to her, saying, "Oh, Grace—Grace."

"What is it?" she said again, then more insistently, "Speak one of you! *What is it?*"

Masters stammered, "It's—them. The ship. Sunk by the Huns."

"The ship—what ship? Percy—explain."

"It's the *Lusitania*, Grace. The ship on which Fred was travelling. She's been sunk, near Cork—by the Germans. The death roll is terrible. We're afraid that—Fred may be among the killed. I'm leaving for Ireland on the night boat."

"My God——" she whispered, "and you?" turning her eyes to Masters.

He licked his lips. "She was with him. She may—have gone too."

"You're going with Percy?"

He nodded. "I went to see Percy at his office before I came round here."

To her own surprise, she caught Masters' arm, and held it tightly.

"Listen—listen to me," she said. "Swear to me now—that you hope before God to find them both alive and well. I give you my word as I hope for salvation—that I do. Go quickly—and—Percy—bring them both—both back safe and well."

Percy said, "Yes—please God. Yes."

She tightened the clasp of her fingers on Masters' arm.

"And you—?" she demanded. "Swear to me—before God—"

"I do—I swear—I mean it, by God I do! I don't want anyone to die. To be drowned. No—honestly, truly—before God."

"Now go, both of you. I'll tell Mama."

Percy said, "I wish Martin were home. He'd tackle this better than I shall."

"There may be nothing—to tackle. Let us pray that there won't be. Have you both got flasks? You have, Captain Masters,

full? Percy, I'll find one for you. You're driving to catch the boat train? Oh, *you're* driving, Captain Masters. Don't take risks. And," she made her glance include them both, though her intention was for Ivor Masters, "don't drink too much. I know it's difficult, but you've got many things, sights, sounds maybe, to face. I'll have some sandwiches made. Save time if you don't have to stop on the road. I'll be back in a moment."

As the door closed, Masters said, "You didn't tell her——"

"No—there might be some mistake. The reply to my telegram only said, 'Not among the list of survivors.'"

Masters shivered. "It's going to be ghastly."

CHAPTER XVII

GRACE

PERCY said to Grace, "God, I'm glad that's over. I feel now I might be able to get it out of my mind. Ugh! Those long sheds, the lines of people—the bodies—children, women, men. Some of 'em looked human, some didn't. Somehow the funeral, this afternoon, the nice peace of the churchyard, the flowers, and—everything, made me feel that particular chapter of horribleness had been partially wiped off my mind."

James, standing near his mother, said, "I bet this will bring the Americans in!"

Martin, home on short leave, to come to the funeral of his brother Fred, stared at his nephew with grave, unhappy eyes.

"Will that be good, do you think, James?"

"Why yes, Uncle Martin. America can't expect us to fight her battles, can she?"

"Perhaps America doesn't think that we are—fighting her battles."

"Come, Martin," Percy said tolerantly, "that's just silly talk. We're out to crush the German War Machine. To make the world safe for democracy. Surely America is as concerned in those aims as we are. This sinking of a great liner carrying women and children will rouse the whole world. America's indignation will be white-hot."

Mechanically Martin repeated, "Carrying women and children. And what else, I wonder?"

Half-truculently, Percy demanded, "What are you hinting, Martin?"

"Nothing—just indulging in speculation."

"I don't like it."

"Neither do I."

Grace said, "Oh, my dears, don't quarrel. Mama will be here in a moment, she wants to make plans. We're all in the Forest Hotels, and they can't stop, even for funerals or the sinking of the *Lusitania*, or America coming in or anything. She's putting a brave front on it, but she's terribly cut up about Fred."

James, his empty sleeve tucked into the pocket of his jacket, cleared his throat suddenly, and made queer little spasmodic movements as if mentally he thrust himself forward, though in reality he scarcely moved.

"I just want to say—that I never had a great deal of love for my father—rightly or wrongly—but now, if by his death he's helped—contributed—to bring America into the war, I feel there was something grand, heroic in the death of those people—my father included."

Percy patted him on the shoulder. "Very rightly and properly said, James."

Suddenly scarlet in the face, James wriggled out of the little group. "Oh—that's nothing. Just—I wanted to put it on record."

Percy followed him, and Grace and Martin were left alone.

Martin, in his uniform of an army chaplain, met Grace's eyes with a little smile.

"That is how legends begin," he said softly. "Fred will be in another ten years' time almost a hero to James."

"Do you mind?"

"Mind? I don't know, Grace. The whole thing is so mysterious to me. Hundreds of people killed, and we congratulate ourselves because it may mean that thousands of other people may come forward to be killed. James didn't have this blood-thirsty feeling while he was in the army. It's the special prerogative of civilians. The private soldier hasn't got it. Oh, he talks about 'the bloody Hun,' he may go crazy at intervals and—jab and jab at whatever comes into his line of vision. But really he's only concerned with cleaning up his own little bit of the line." He broke off suddenly and said, lowering his voice, and leaning forward so that he seemed to cut them off from the other people in the room, "I went over to Mrs. Masters' funeral this morning. I couldn't help feeling that one of us ought to go. Percy refused point blank, naturally James couldn't go. I had a long talk to the husband. There were very few people present.

Swathford came over, but he left immediately. The rest were local people who came in cars and drove away when the service was over."

"Oh, you spoke to Captain Masters?" Her voice sounded at once startled and eager. Martin did not look up, he continued to speak in the same quiet, level tone.

"Yes. He was generally insulting about my Church. Oh—he didn't mean it. He believes all priests of the Catholic Church to be political agents in disguise, and still regards the word 'Jesuit' as a crowning insult. Rather the same attitude as my mother's a few years ago. Then suddenly he became quiet and rather expansive. Your name was mentioned——"

"My name!"

Martin disregarded the interruption. "He told me that I might repeat this to you. He said that you meant a great deal to him."

"He told me so too, Martin, the whole thing is incredible. We needn't even discuss it."

"He told me," Martin went on evenly, "that he had scarcely spoken to you. Only watched you very often. He assured me that, right up to the time when he found his wife's body, he hoped that he might find her alive. That he meant what he said to you when you asked him to swear. He added that he did want to marry you. That he imagined such a thing might happen through a divorce, but that he never imagined that it could happen through death." He paused, then added, "And I believe him."

"But, Martin dear——" She laughed softly and shakily.

"Hush," he warned, "talk to me later. Here's Mama."

Elizabeth Forest entered with Amos Swan and "young" Dr. Thirk. She moved slowly, Grace thought that the last week had aged her. She seemed to have lost that certainty which had been hers. She moved to the chair which had been placed for her, and sank into it as if very weary. Grace glanced round the big room, where the tables had been moved in order to make room for the assembled people. The room, her mother-in-law's sitting-room, seemed unfamiliar without the customary arrangement of furniture. There on the wall hung the portrait of the first James Forest, who had died over twenty years ago. He had become a sort of legend, Grace remembered. Would her own son have a portrait of his father hung on the wall of his own room, and endow the dead man with every virtue because no one would have sufficient knowledge or courage to contradict him? Or had

Elizabeth's husband been, perhaps, all that she claimed? One couldn't be certain—and anyway what did it matter?

All these people, most of them at all events, were the result of Elizabeth Merter's marriage with James Forest, or through marriage, with members of that family. There was old Herbert Crowther and his son Godfrey, Elizabeth's cousins from Forchester. An old man with a stolid, red-faced son, their conventional black clothes smelling strongly of moth ball.

Percy stood near the fireplace, looking taller and thinner than ever in his mourning. Grace thought, 'Even to-day his tie looks like a piece of black tape, and I know it's a new one.' Eleanor Benfold, immense and dignified in the stiffest and most expensive silk, dabbed her eyes from time to time with a lace-edged handkerchief. Gladys, dear, capable, pretty Gladys, was talking in a low voice to Dr. Thirk. "Young" Dr. Thirk, who would never see fifty again. Amos Swan bent over Mrs. Forest, arranging papers on a small table which had been set before her. James and his young wife were seated rather stiffly on straight-backed chairs set against the wall, and Martin, the only man in uniform, was staring out of the window.

Grace thought, 'In the agent's house at Swathford, he's sitting alone. Probably drinking too much—smoking too much certainly. He spoke to Martin—about me. I ought to be annoyed, ought to feel that it was an unconscionable thing to do. Why don't I feel that? Perhaps because I know that he *had* to talk to someone—and about me! Oh, dear, I expect it's dreadful of me to allow myself even to think like this when we've just come back from Fred's funeral, only——'

Lawyer Swan stood upright, his hands pressed palm inwards against the small of his back. "Our dear friend Mrs. Forest wishes to speak to you."

Martin turned from the window, Herbert Crowther was attacked by a sudden fit of coughing. Percy said, "Godfrey, get your father a drink of water."

Elizabeth said, "I have asked Mr. Swan and Dr. Thirk to listen to my ideas, after Mr. Swan has read the will, of which he and Dr. Thirk are executors. I dislike the public reading of wills. As you know, the Forest Hotels are a large and very successful concern. A unique concern in the history of English hotel-keeping. I am purposely refraining from speaking—of—my own personal loss. My son, and I should be the last to deny it, may have disappointed me in some ways, but he was—my son, and it is sufficient to say that I loved him dearly. As"—

she paused and let her eyes wander round the group before her—"I love all my children, and others connected with me. You are all—very dear to me. Had Fredrick lived the Majestic at Sun-chester would have been his. The transfer was ready to be signed when he returned from America. He did not return alive and the Majestic is still mine. Such monies as are invested in any of my concerns are done so by private persons, not by the general public. The dividends paid to these investors are large, but their blocks of shares are small; that is why I can refer to the hotels as mine.

"My son has left nothing except a certain amount of money, the major portion of which was left to someone who is dead. The only surviving relative of that person refuses to accept it. I think that is correct, Amos?"

"Quite. Won't take a penny. There are legacies of a small and personal nature—rings, watches, and so forth to everyone here."

"These will be dealt with by you. Thank you, Amos."

Grace stood there listening, conscious that Martin was watching her. So he had refused to accept money left to his wife. Even though he had admitted to her that he was in debt, that his dead wife was in debt. The thought seemed to lift a weight from her heart.

Elizabeth's voice cut into her thoughts. "James, my dear, you are sufficiently well to take up work again? That's good. I want you eventually to manage the Majestic. At the moment you don't know enough of hotel management. I wish you to go to Brighton, to study under Mr. Bassinetti at the Callingly. It will be a very pleasant place, Edith, my dear, for you to begin your married life. The air is excellent and will complete your cure, James. Gladys—and no one could have learnt in a better school than she has done with my dear Grace—will take over the Ring of Bells, and"—for the first time Elizabeth's voice faltered a little—"Grace, I wish you to manage the Majestic—until such a time as James is qualified to do so."

"But, Mama——"

"My dear, we will discuss it later."

Grace felt Martin's hand on her arm, heard his quiet voice saying,

"She's right, you know—absolutely right."

"But, Martin, I hate the place. I was never happy there. I don't like these huge luxury hotels. They're not my line."

II

She had not grown to like it. She looked back with longing to the Ring of Bells. True, she had made a success of it, an even greater success than Fred had done. Her hands held the reins more firmly, her eyes were sharper, she cared very little for her own comfort, and everything for the comfort of her guests. She had kept up the luxury standard, and had added innovations which were helpful to and much appreciated by the big business men who came to Sunchester. Ideas which she had put into practice in Callingly were not abandoned because she had left a small market town for a large industrial one. People might not know the difference between a new laid egg and a merely "fresh" one, but they did like to know that the Majestic had its own "home farm" and were prepared to guarantee every egg as "New Laid," all butter as "genuine fresh country butter" and all jams, pickles and bottled fruit as "home made."

"Flatter people," Grace said to Gladys, "make them believe that you think they want—*only the best*. Half of them neither know nor care, but they love the assumption that they do. Annie's niece and her husband, Charlie Dickens, run the farm excellently. And," she smiled, "it pays."

Or again, "People don't want indiscriminate luxury. They want dignified comfort, with all the latest improvements. Gilt chairs mean nothing unless they're comfortable. A hairdresser on the premises has no value unless he or she is exceptionally good. Telephones in every room are no use unless they work. On the other hand, a page boy with a sponge and a basin of disinfectant, going round to wipe every telephone mouthpiece once a day costs nothing but the boy's time, and makes people declare that the hotel is so—hygienic!"

The first year had been unbearably lonely. Gladys had fallen deeply in love with Walter Rivers, one of Coster's most successful travellers. They were married in 1916, and Gladys's preoccupation with the hotel and her handsome young husband, left her little time to visit her mother at Sunchester.

James was at Brighton, his first son had been born in the spring of '16, and named—somewhat pompously, Grace felt, Francis James Percy. James was doing well, and Grace believed that she would be able to return to Callingly and her much loved Ring of Bells in a few months' time. True, James had not his father's flair for "making a splash," but he had all his mother's

attention to detail, and, what was more, he enjoyed the steady routine of a huge hotel, took a pride in it, and never spared himself in working.

The loneliness of the first three months was something she could never forget. Martin had persuaded her to come to the Majestic. At first she had refused, asking indignantly why she should return to a place which held nothing but painful memories for her. For the first time she had quarrelled with her mother-in-law. Elizabeth had argued, almost pleaded and finally lost her temper.

"You'll go because I think it's wiser, Grace. And if you don't think so too—more's the pity!"

"Fred turns me out of the Majestic and you insist that I shall go back. What kind of memories do you imagine the place holds for me?"

"Nothing you can't forget if you try hard enough. And"—she bent forward, her thin old hands clasping the arms of her chair—"I don't choose to have the husband of that woman running in and out of the Ring of Bells, filling people's mouths."

"I never heard such insane, stupid nonsense!"

"Then let Captain Masters mind what he says. When Amos Swan went to see him about that money of poor Fredrick's, what did he say?"

"How should I know?" Grace retorted.

"He said that he didn't want it. That it had better go back to you. He said, 'God knows he gave her a rotten time, she ought to have some compensation. I wish to God I could do something to wipe out all she's had to face.' That's what he said."

"If Amos Swan told you that," Grace stormed, "then he ought to be ashamed of himself; untrustworthy, chattering old fool!"

"Hold your tongue about Amos! He's been a good loyal friend to me."

It was Martin who finally persuaded her. Martin who came and sat long over his after-dinner coffee, and spoke gently and reasonably.

"Grace, tell me—I'll treat whatever you say as being under the seal of the confessional—is this man anything to you?"

"I don't know—how can I tell? I've only seen him half-a-dozen times. If Mama goes on as she is doing, she'll make me believe that I'm frantically in love with him. If she'd let me alone, I should——"

"Should—what?" Martin asked.

"Well, I should——" She was stammering, and felt angry

with herself for doing so. "I should—find out. Understand myself. Now—it's all incredible. Impossible. Why won't she leave me alone here, Martin?"

"Because she's afraid, mortally afraid, of people talking. It was impossible for the truth concerning Fred and Mrs. Masters not to leak out in some quarters. People have been pretty decent, considerate, but after all a secret which is shared by half-a-dozen people is not a secret long. A hundred people in the hotel must have guessed, people on the boat going out, some of the survivors on the *Lusitania*, lawyers—oh, the list is endless. Grace, if there is the chance of happiness for you with this man, be wise and leave Callingly. You couldn't meet yet. This tragedy is too new. The shadow of those two dead people would be too close to you. It would obscure any sunlight. Be wise, Grace dear."

She had gone, hating it all; resenting being virtually forced to leave her own home, the place she had made so successful. Masters had made no sign, he had not written, and in addition to her other grievances Grace began to feel that after all he had not meant what he said. Or if he had meant it, the whole business had been, as she had said, fantastic and impossible. Perhaps his visits had been the result of too many whiskies and sodas,—the thought made her feel physically sick—Masters might even have spoken as he did in pique. Fred Forest had taken his wife, he'd show Fred Forest what he could do!

Then one sultry August afternoon, when Fred had been dead for three months, the telephone rang in her sitting-room—and the clerk asked if she would see Captain Masters?

"Captain Masters," Grace repeated stupidly. "What is his business?"

"He says that he won't detain you, Madam."

"Very well—send him up here."

She hurried into her bedroom, stared at herself in the glass, patted her hair into place, and despised herself for caring how she looked. What did it matter? Nothing to her.

He was waiting for her when she returned. He had always been thin, but she fancied that he had grown thinner. He was wearing a dark grey suit, and the colour made his tan look sallow. She thought, 'He should wear blue or brown, never grey.'

She said, "How are you, Captain Masters?"

He stared at her. "Thanks, very well. And you?"

"I'm very well. This stuffy heat is a little trying."

"Yes—beastly."

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks."

Not an inspiring opening to a conversation with a man who once said that he wanted to marry me, Grace thought. He sat down, pulled out a cigarette case, and said, "May I? Thanks."

Once lit, he examined the end of his cigarette with concentrated care then said abruptly, "I came to tell you that they've taken me."

"Taken you? For what—who have taken you?"

"The Army. Oh, I know I'm forty-five. I lied about that. But I can manage. The old limp won't matter. I go for training to-morrow. I thought that I'd come and tell you that I haven't changed."

She was reminded of Mr. Barkis—wanted to laugh. Then wondered, if she did, would she laugh from amusement or relief.

"I expect," Masters continued, "that you thought I—given up all hope. I'll never do that. Only—someone—said it was only decent to leave you alone."

"Old Amos Swan."

"How did you know?"

"I know old Amos."

"Oh—I see. Well, that's all. I don't want to keep you. Should think you've got your hands full with this place. Marvellous, isn't it? Like a small town." He beamed at her suddenly, the smile seemed to crack his brown face. "You're damned clever! I'm just a fool."

"Will you have a drink, Captain Masters?"

"I dunno. Sometimes think that I drink too damn much."

"Then why drink?"

"Couldn't say—nothing else to do. Y'know—long evenings. At the club one drink leads to another. That's how it is. Yes, I'll have one, thanks. Not likely to have another with you for a long time."

She rose. "I'll get it."

In her dining-room, she took out the same Georgian salver, sought for the Waterford goblet, the old decanter, and carried them back to him. Moving a small table she set it at his elbow.

He looked at them, screwing up his eyes.

"I say—the same old things. Nice old salver—that goblet—it's a beauty. Was this done on purpose?"

"Why—yes." Then quickly, "These are things I use every day."

He said, "Queer—these things cropped up almost at the—beginning of the chapter, didn't they?" Then sharply, "You've

not brought them out to mark the end of the chapter, have you?"

She answered, speaking very slowly, "To close the chapter—no, I don't think so."

"You mean that? Mean that—you're rather glad to see me. If you're a hundredth part as glad as I am to see you, I'm satisfied. I felt that I couldn't go away without a sight and sound of you. Grace—d'you mind my calling you that? I always do when I'm talking about you to myself. Grace, if and when I come back, will you marry me?"

She laughed. "You still play the same game," she said. "I've warned you, I cannot be rushed. I must have a chance to know you."

"Well, if I get leave, can I give you that chance? Can I write to you? I'm not much good at it, but it 'ud show that I was thinking about you, wouldn't it? Oh, I've scarcely any money."

"Do you want some?" The anxiety in her voice astonished her. "I mean—can I lend you some?"

"Lord, angel, no! I've enough for what I need. I meant I haven't got much myself—perhaps enough for one, scarcely enough for two—comfortably at all events."

"I have sufficient, I think, for us both. I'm fairly well off."

"God bless the girl—I'm not going to live on your money when we're married."

"Rushing your fences again," she said. "I warned you once."

He raised his glass. "To—us," he said.

He sat and talked to her for an hour. He said nothing particularly interesting or amusing; again Grace thought, 'He's really a stupid man. I've rarely met anyone with such a limited vocabulary. Why do I like him so much—for I do. I wish he wasn't going away.'

When he looked at his watch, with the shabby leather strap, he started to his feet. "I say—I must go. Got to get to London to-night. Oh, and I almost forgot the most important thing I wanted to ask you. I'm a complete fool!"

"I imagined that you had asked me the most important thing."

"There I go! So I have—and you've not answered me. No, this is something different. We'll go back to the other in a moment. Will you look after Marguerite de Valois for me?" Then watching her puzzled face, he laughed. "No, that's all right. She's called Meg for short. She's my cocker. The loveliest in the whole world. I do so want to know that she's with you."

She's downstairs now, longing to come and be introduced to you. You will, won't you?"

"Of course. I'll take great care of her."

He rushed out, and returned with a silky-coated spaniel, who raised her large appealing eyes, and seemed to breathe sentimental affection. Grace stooped and patted her gently.

"My dear, I'll look after you. Make friends with me, won't you?"

She looked up to find Masters' eyes filled with tears.

"Don't," Grace begged, "I'll look after her so well."

He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes, and again she felt that he looked like a small boy.

"I'm as sentimental as Meg is," he confessed. "Bit of a wretch saying good-bye to the two people who mean most in all the world to you. I'd better go before I make a fool of myself." Again he bent to caress the dog, then stood upright, and laid his hands on Grace's shoulders. "Good-bye, my dearest; I'll write to you."

"Good-bye and God bless you."

"Can I kiss you—once? Kind of—parting present?"

He kissed her cheek, gently, without passion, and yet the touch of his lips, the harshness of his moustache thrilled her. With his eyes watching hers intently, he said, "And—you think—one day—it might be all right, Grace? I do love you so."

"I think that one day," she repeated, "it *will* be all right."

At the door, he turned. "In case you have forgotten or didn't know, my name's Ivor George; use whichever you like."

Alone with the dog, who came and nestled against her foot, looking up at her with puzzled, melancholy eyes, she fondled the long, soft ears, and sighed.

"Most people would call me a fool—I believe that I'm being wise for almost the first time in my life. I do know him. He's stupid, and lonely; he drinks too much; he swears abominably. But he's kind and gentle; he may rush his fences, but he has restraint, and decency. I shan't make a mistake."

CHAPTER XVIII

GRACE

MASTERS' letters began to come to her, and she came to look for them. They were not good letters, they told her nothing in particular. His writing was that of a schoolboy who promised

to have character. His spelling was wildly inaccurate. "I never want to be a nuisance," he wrote, "but this is not only affection, it's something deeper."

The bad spelling, the somewhat laboured handwriting brought that queer feeling of tenderness for him; when Grace finished reading his letters her eyes were wet.

He had his first leave in the autumn of 1916—ten days. Grace met him in London, he looked more lean than ever. There were new lines round his eyes, and the corners of his mouth drooped a little. He put his hands on her shoulders, and smiled; the smile took years off his apparent age.

"It's good to see you," he said. "I've thought about you so much. Tried to get an exact mental picture. I got afraid that it was getting blurred—fuzzy y'know, like old snap-shots do. Now, I find it's all right. You're just as I used to see you—in my mind's eye—out there."

He wanted to see revues and musical comedies, he wanted to talk about "Marguerite de Valois," he kept firing off short, disconnected sentences, "How's Mrs. Forest—the old lady, eh?" and then, without waiting for an answer, "And James—what about the old arm?" Once he said, "Martin—that's a grand feller. Frightened me at first—priest and all that—but he's as decent as he can be."

Grace had wondered if he would want her to stay in the same hotel. He didn't. He only asked where she was staying.

"The Savoy," she said, "I always stay there."

He grinned. "I lay six to four you do! I go to the Regent Palace, and jolly good it is too. Telephone in every room, so I can call you and wish you good-morning."

He wanted to give her an engagement ring, and when she hesitated he pulled off his rather battered old signet and begged that she would wear that.

"No one 'ul know what it is. Only we shall know," he said. "What do you call me—when you think about me?" he asked, "Ivor or George?"

Grace said, "I meant to ask you about that. James was saying that your name was Hartley, the other day."

Masters nodded. "It is. Generous godfathers and godmothers gave me three names—Hartley Ivor George. People"—he hesitated—"or most of 'em used to call me Hartley. I'd rather you called me something else."

She said gravely, "I see."

"You always do see," he told her; "that's one of the grand

things about you. I don't have to have chapter and verse and cross references. You jump to things. I'm grateful, lots of times."

Grace realized that without actually having discussed it, he hoped that she would marry him as soon as the war was over. Once or twice she wondered why he did not press for an immediate wedding, and knew that had he done so, she would have consented to it. His attraction for her was something she still did not fully understand. She still realized that he was stupid, he might have some knowledge of estate management, of horses and dogs, but that was the limit of his intelligence. His stories of the war were long and rather pointless tales of the officers' mess, or how some "brass hat made an ass of himself" in some way which was never quite clear to her. Or he would tell, drawing diagrams with a fork on the tablecloth, how this regiment "came up," how this barrage fell short, or how some reinforcement was late, usually through some extraordinary lack of foresight or intelligence on the part of one of the High Command. He recounted these errors as if they were matters of the greatest humour.

"But that meant men were being killed?" Grace cried in horror.

"Yes—well, that was inevitable," Masters would admit. "You can't have a war without men being killed, any more than you can make an omelette without breaking eggs, can you? That's the idea of a war—to kill people."

She shivered. "Horrible."

"Wasteful perhaps," he corrected. "Not so very horrible. Men have been killing each other since the beginning of time. They'll go on doing it. It's—natural."

One beautiful afternoon he drove her to Richmond, and together they sat in one of the shady rides, watching the deer, and the sunshine filtering through the leaves dappling the ground as if in imitation of the soft coats of the does. Masters lay on his back, holding her hand in his, staring up through the leaves. Grace fancied that he was asleep until he spoke.

"Nice, this, isn't it?" he said. "Something to remember, eh?"

She did not speak, only held his thin fingers more tightly.

"Only one more day—whew! I shan't like going back much. But things are all right, between us, aren't they? I mean—you've made up your mind, haven't you?"

"Yes," she said softly, "I've made up my mind, my dear."

"For better or worse, richer or poorer, 'till death do us part."

"All that."

"Wonderful. It's a kind of miracle I never thought could happen to me." He took her hand and laid it on his lips. "I'll be good to you. I swear that. Will your folks mind?"

"Mrs. Forest may mind—at first. I'm afraid that James may not quite approve. Martin will be glad about it."

"Why may James disapprove?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't quite know. James does disapprove of things he can't understand. Francis never did."

"Do you ever think of—the other man, Fredrick?"

"Very seldom. I don't want to."

"I'm glad of that."

"Do you know that James has a son—three months old. I'm a grandmother. Doesn't that frighten you?" Grace asked.

"Nothing frightens me, except the possibility of losing you. That terrifies me." He rolled over so that he could look up into her face. "What's the matter with us talking about losing?" he asked impatiently. "Just scaring ourselves to death. Say—Ivor I love you and I'm going to marry you."

Obediently she repeated the words. He sighed contentedly.

"That's worth hearing."

He refused to let her come to Victoria to see him go. He stood in her sitting-room at the Savoy, staring at her as if he could not tire of watching her.

"It won't be for long," he said.

"It will seem long," Grace answered.

With that queer jerkiness which she had come to know arose from a difficulty to put his deepest feelings into words, he began to speak quickly, almost nervously.

"When I came back—on leave—in the train and on the boat—I thought that I'd ask you to come and stay with me—at my hotel. I had it all planned. Knew what I was going to say. I even thought that you might—half expect me to. Well, when I saw you, and talked to you again, I knew that I couldn't. You weren't that kind. I didn't even want you to be. I've not run particularly straight, Grace. I've racketed about more than a bit. Taken my fun where I could. You're different. This—my loving you, and you loving me—is different to anything that's happened to me before—in all my life. It's grand, and it's going to go on being grand. Does that all sound like rubbish to you?"

"My dear, it sounds wonderful. It's the beginning of my life—our life."

He nodded. "That's what I feel. Darling, I've got to go. I can't keep the British Army waiting, and they can't get on without me. I'll write to you a lot, and remember—I'll soon be back, and we'll get married. Sounds nice, eh? We'll get married."

II

Grace returned to Sunchester, conscious that her mind was filled with thoughts of Ivor Masters. She tried to recall their conversations together, to remember with vivid clarity how he had looked or spoken or laughed on various occasions. For the first time in her life, she was in love—mentally and physically. Years ago she had married Fred Forest believing that she loved him entirely. Now she knew that she had married Fred because she had imagined him to be someone completely different from the man he was in reality. She had hugged her illusions regarding him for years.

His death, and at first she had reproached herself for feeling as she did, had come as a relief and a solution. Not that she had loved Ivor Masters consciously at that time, though, looking back, she wondered if she had not loved him from the first day when he drove her to York, the day when she heard that James was wounded.

If she had loved him then, it had been almost unconscious, certainly lacking in any specific quality. Conscious, actual love had come later.

Now she knew that he obsessed her. She would work, work harder than ever, because work might dull the thoughts of him and the anxieties she felt for him. Only when her work for the day was over would she allow herself the luxury and complete happiness of thinking of him, writing to him, and planning the innumerable parcels which she would send to him.

Other plans she would not make. She could not imagine Ivor living in the Majestic, neither could she picture him at the Ring of Bells. He was essentially a person who must live in the country.

She smiled, 'He'll present problems because he is, apparently, so simple. Well, I can face them.'

She flung herself into her work at the Majestic. During the days which followed she was surprised to find that she was almost enjoying the world. Her old hatred of the hotel had died, she was interested in watching the smooth running of the huge concern, she had come to understand the complications of the

kitchen, the complexities of the licensing laws; she knew that the magistrates liked and trusted her, and that whenever possible they never refused any application for extensions. The chef, the headwaiter, the majordomo, and even the house-keeper had ceased to be coldly critical or actually hostile, and worked with her well and loyally.

She insisted on proper holidays, and encouraged the less well paid servants to save for them; she added to every five pounds saved a substantial contribution of her own.

Elizabeth Forest coming over from Callingly to see her, listened and nodded her approval.

"I was always against the Majestic," she said, "even when poor Fredrick was so set on it. But it's proved to be a good business. He was far-sighted, poor fellow, I will say that for him. You're reaping the benefit of all the work he put into the place."

Obediently, Grace answered, "Yes, Mama, indeed." Only she knew how slapdash, how flashy Fred's work had been. He had worked for show, worked to make the Majestic one of the great luxury hotels of the British Isles, but he had worked on surface things, with the possible exception of the excellent menus which he had always demanded.

Elizabeth said, "I gather that you're happier here nor what you were at first, eh, Grace luv?"

"Much happier, Mama. But it's not due to the hotel or the work, you know."

She saw the elder woman's hand close tightly on the arms of her chair, saw her stiffen a little, and knew that the bright, keen eyes were suddenly apprehensive and cold.

"Then what is it due to, Grace?"

"I'm going to be married Mama, when the war is over."

Characteristically Elizabeth exclaimed, "To be married? But you'll stay on here—even if you are."

The Majestic, the business came first with Mama, Grace thought. Of course, she wasn't actually one of the family, but having married into it she must assume its responsibilities. Yet Elizabeth was neither hard or unkind, she could be sympathetic and understanding, only where the business which she had built was concerned did she show herself like this.

"I should think that it is improbable, Mama. The man I am going to marry wouldn't fit in here. He'd be a misfit."

"If he's the man I imagine," her mother-in-law retorted tartly, "I hope that you've made sure that he won't be a misfit mostly anywhere, Grace."

Grace contrived not to allow her temper to rise, she smiled. "Mama dear, I think that he can find his place where he will be useful, as most people can, given a little determination and perhaps a little help from people who love him."

"And you're one of those people?"

"I am indeed."

"Well, I suppose I can say nothing. You're forty-five, you ought to know your own mind, I hope that you do. It's this place that bothers me. I've got to admit that you've done splendidly, Grace."

"James can come here when I go."

"James is doing very nicely at Brighton. I've good reports of him from Mr. Basinetti. James is still over young to take this place on alone. Barely twenty."

"Ah, it's no good building bridges before we come to the river, is it? Things will arrange themselves."

Elizabeth watched her attentively. Certainly she looked well, her skin was as clear as a girl's, her eyes bright and shining. She seemed tranquil, disinclined to worry about anything. Her smile came more easily than it used to, and she radiated happiness. When anyone came to speak to her about some hotel business, when the telephone shrilled, as it did every five minutes, Grace remained undisturbed. Her answers to every question showed how great was her grasp of the business. Elizabeth found herself mentally using the word admirable.

Grace ranged through a variety of subjects, seeming to have every matter at her finger tips. Elizabeth watched and listened, her admiration growing for this handsome daughter-in-law of hers.

"Yes, we were over the £100 mark for sweets last year—quite right. Six pounds tax, isn't it? That's correct, Mr. Jervis," and, "I have told Billings distinctly again and again that I will not allow any credit in the off-licence. I dislike the place, and if Billings can't do as I tell him, I'll close it, and he'll have to find a new job. Tell him that, if you please, Mr. Fanshow."

Then, "Who is that? Oh, you, Walter—how is Gladys? And the boy? Splendid. Yes, Grandmama is here now. What's that? My dear boy, there has been no superb port since before 1884. The '87 was good, but nothing superlative. No, the same applies to claret. I'll take any '93 or '95 Hock, and I'll take as much '11 Champagne as you can let me have. Ask Lady Bower when you see her, what *she* means by 'superb.' Good-bye,

Walter. Yes, Grandmama will be home quite early to-morrow. My love to Gladys and the baby."

She was turning back to speak to Mrs. Forest when once again the telephone rang. Grace made a grimace of mock dismay.

"This goes on all the time, Mama." Then taking down the receiver, "Yes. Oh, Alderman Willis, how are you? Yes, I'm very much interested in the idea. It seems excellent to me. Where is the proposed starting-place—Carlisle? It should prove most interesting. No, it can't be possible for some time—a Central Control Board. Yes, do keep me informed."

Elizabeth smiled. "You know mor'n I do, my dear. What's this about Carlisle?"

Rapidly, but with evident grasp of her subject Grace explained the first principles of the Carlisle scheme. Certainly, the prospect of being married again had not dulled her interest in matters which were connected with the business.

"You're a grand lass," Mrs. Forest said. "I could have wished that Eleanor had busied herself about something. She's got too much money, that's the trouble." Then with sudden kindness, "You're very close about this young man of yours, Grace. I should like to hear something about him, if you'd care to tell me."

"Mama, I thought that the subject was distasteful to you."

"Nay, Grace, we must live for the living—not for the dead."

"He's out in France, and we are to be married when the war ends."

"Which it will—with America in helping us."

"He's not very clever, or good-looking, but I happen to be very much in love with him, and he—yes, he is with me."

"Why then, there's nothing more to be said, except to hope that you'll both be happy, and that I wish from the bottom of my heart. I know you had difficult times, hard times, but a mother makes excuses, and—I've made as many as most. Is that dog there his?"

"How clever of you to guess! Come here 'Meg'—her real name is Marguerite de Valois. When he first asked me would I look after Marguerite de Valois, I got quite a shock. I fancied for one second that the lady must be some dancer in whom he was—well, interested."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "I hope that he's not the kind who gets interested in dancers, or anyone else, Grace."

Grace laughed. "I don't suppose that he has been any better than anyone else. Whatever he has done in the way of being indiscreet—I don't think—no, I am certain that he won't be again."

"You're fond of him?" The tone was almost wistful. Grace thought that with all her money, all her interests, Elizabeth Forest was a lonely old woman.

"I'm completely in love with him, and love him more than I believed it was possible to love anyone."

"Ah!" Elizabeth sighed. "Just like me and my dear husband, James."

Christmas came. Ivor wrote that he was the envy of the regiment; that not another man in the army had such parcels, such a collection of delicacies. He had supplied half the mess, and even the C.O. had been markedly civil while the Coronas lasted. Now was the time, he wrote, while the scent of those cigars still lingered in his memory, to ask for leave.

"And if I get it, how would it appeal to you to get married and not wait for the end of the war? If you turn down this idea I shall try to grin and bear it, but the grin will be rather forced and I shall be awfully disappointed." He spelt both "disappointed" and "appeal" with one "p" each, Grace noticed. "I have written to my bank and told them to send you along my mother's engagement ring. It's old-fashioned, but it is rather nice. Please wear it, and we'll buy the next ring together. I ought to be home in February. I believe that it is the luckiest of all months in which to be married."

For the first time doubts began to beset Grace Forest. Not that she doubted her love for him, or his for her—this was built on a rock; but she found herself worrying about her age. She was forty-five, and even if it were possible for her to have a child, was it wise? By the time a child of hers was twenty, she would be sixty-five, virtually an old woman. She had two grown-up children—James was turned twenty and Gladys three years older. Both James and Gladys had children, would Ivor dislike the idea of marrying a woman whom little children addressed as "Grannie"? Her way of life—she had worked for so long—might have made her dictatorial, she had got into the habit of giving orders. Might he not resent a little that she never asked advice, that she was capable and sure, that she relied on herself and her own judgments? She would never be able to join in his amusements. She had never learnt to ride, she would not have handled a gun or felt any joy in killing if

she had been paid to do so. Even golf was a game completely unknown to her. Fishing she regarded as the duller of sports. She took a mild interest in the Classic Races, but the smaller meetings left her uninterested. Was Ivor going to find her lacking in companionship, in mutual interest?

For nights she worried as she lay sleepless, trying to find a solution to those problems which always seemed, in the early hours of the morning, so insoluble. Finally, in desperation she went to Claudia Bower.

She found Claudia in her office at the works where, after the death of Sir Edward and the departure of her nephew to France, she had constituted herself manager. This nephew, the son of her much-loved brother Robert, had been killed, her only son had been killed too, and still Claudia continued her work. She had grown to look her age, her face and figure were gaunt, but her spirit was as indomitable as ever. She looked up from the work on which she was engaged, and nodded to Grace.

"Sit down, m' dear. I shan't be a moment. There's a devil of a lot to get through. Ring for some tea, will you?"

Grace rang; one of the waitresses from the canteen answered the bell.

"Her ladyship wants tea, please."

Claudia said without glancing up from her work, "And let it be tea, not blush."

"Yes, m'lady."

When the tea came, black and strong, Claudia pushed away her work.

"Now," she enquired, smiling and lapsing into dialect, "w'ats ter do, my lass. Oot wi' it!"

Simply and without affectation Grace told her story. The elder woman made no comment except to interject "Hartley Masters, eh?" or "Aye, that's so." When the recital was ended, she lit a cigarette, and settled herself in her big office chair.

"And you're allowing this to worry you? Have sense, girl. Age! When I married Edward, bless him, everyone—or almost everyone—screamed that he was too old, that we had nothing in common. No one worried when I married my first husband, Francis Costa. And they very well might have done. A rapscallion if ever one walked! Still, he gave me Fernanda, so I can think almost kindly of him. Edward was everything I wasn't, and vice versa. He liked solid meals, port wine, long committee meetings, and even longer time to consider everything he was

going to do, or might do. He liked comic songs and low comedians. I don't mean of necessity vulgar ones. I once went with him to the Palace, and saw the Egbert Brothers. I thought I should come out a widow. Edward nearly strangled himself laughing. He didn't really like women to smoke or swear. I do both—always did. In his heart he disliked foreigners. And Jews. Both his stepdaughter and I married them. Yes, Francis Costa was a Spanish Jew. Edward came to love Henry Pinto, 'Nanda's husband. Yet—there never was a happier pair than Edward—and what a grand fellow he was—and I. Nothing in common—except one thing; we loved one another. I don't say that I loved him as much as he loved me—at first. Oh, I did later. Dear God, how I missed him! How I shall always miss him for that matter. Marriage is a risk, Grace Forest. Only fools try to deny it. Don't we take risks every day? And for things that don't matter a tinker's curse. Every time I go out into those works a belt might break and kill me, but I don't keep away. He's a decent chap, is Masters. I've known him more or less for years. He's been battered about a good deal, and he's taken it all on the chin. Swathford told me the other day that he never wished for a better agent.

"I don't often quote the Scriptures, but take this home with you, 'Perfect love casteth out fear'—and even imperfect love ought to cast out a good many fears. Don't doubt yourself, and don't doubt him. I thought that you'd more about you, Grace."

Grace said, "I'm ashamed of my fears. I've been so worried. It does mean everything to me Claudia."

Claudia poured herself out another cup of tea. Surveying the black liquid, she said, "Now that's what I call a good cup of tea. They tell me it 'ul give me indigestion, heartburn and a dozen other things. All right—I take risks over even cups of tea. They happen to be something of which I am very fond. There's your little parable for you!" She drank her tea, rose and coming to where Grace sat, laid her hand on her shoulder.

"Nay, love," she said, "if two folks is willin', if they baith mak' opp their mind ter mak' a reit do on anything they'll manage it. Dean't pull away fra yin anuther, pull t'same road, an' ye'll get somewheer. Now," briskly, "what's this young Rivers has been telling you about some *superb* '87 port? Elizabeth told me when I was over to Callingly the other day. When I see Rivers I'll clout his lugs for him, even if he did marry your daughter, Grace."

Grace went back to Sunchester, her fears were dead. She remembered what Claudia had said again and again when her doubts attacked her. "I take risks even over cups of tea. They happen to be something of which I am very fond. There's your little parable for you."

To say that she was "very fond" of Ivor Masters, was what Martin called, "a piece of masterly understatement."

CHAPTER XIX

GRACE

IVOR was coming home. He sent his short, baldly expressed letters by almost every post. Scraps, many of them; a few lines, scrawled hurriedly, with terms of endearment sandwiched in between such indefinite news as he was allowed to send. One thing emerged—that he was to have ten days' leave, and that they would be married at the earliest possible moment.

Grace Forest read and re-read his letters, sitting in her room at the Majestic, interrupted a dozen times by managers, house-keepers, head waiters, all asking questions relating to the running of the huge hotel. She had to drag herself back from her imaginings, her dreams, her visions of the future. Strange, she thought, how very real those dreams seemed, and how vague and unimportant were those things which appertained to the hotel.

What did the Majestic, the dining-rooms, the ball-room, the luxurious bedrooms and splendid private bathrooms matter when compared with Ivor Masters and her life in the future with him? Calmly and methodically—because calm and method had come to be two integral things in her nature—she made her arrangements. She interviewed her staff, told them that she was taking a holiday, that Mr. Basinetti would come up from Brighton to manage the Majestic in her absence.

"It will give Mr. James an opportunity to run the Brighton hotel on his own," she said smiling. "He must begin to stand alone sometime, and as I not only want but need a holiday, this is an excellent chance for him to win his spurs."

She went over to Callingly, told Gladys what she was going to do.

Gladys, who at twenty-four was growing too stout for her years, who was utterly happy with her good-looking husband,

Walter Rivers, and her splendid child, smiled with eyes which were suddenly misty.

"Mother dear, I can't tell you how glad I am! I always liked him. He was always kind and—oh, simple and nice." Then, gravely, "Poor Mother, up to now you've not had much of a deal, have you?"

Grace said, "My dear, the future matters, one can forget the past."

She visited her mother-in-law. Elizabeth had lost none of her strength of character, was as capable as ever of making decisions, but she grumbled that she was growing rheumatic, and poured scorn upon Dr. Thirk who talked about a "cure" at Harrogate or Buxton.

"A cure! Nay, there's only one cure for rheumatism, and Wilfred Thirk knows what it is as well as I do. A long rest—in a long box."

Grace spoke of her approaching marriage. The old woman nodded.

"Aye, you told me a bit back," she said. "Well, I hope that it will work out all right. Life's not easy for women, and yours has been no easier than most of them. You've a right to seek happiness and please God you'll find it, Grace, for you've been a good lass, a fine lass, and I recognise that." She leant forward and peered into her daughter-in-law's face. "You don't like the Majestic any better than you did, eh, Grace?"

"I shall never have any real affection for it, Mama."

Elizabeth nodded. "Aye, that's what I thought. Keep at it while the end of the war, m' dear, then our James can take it over."

Grace smiled. "Then what shall I do?"

"You'll manage the Royal Lion, that's what you'll do!"

"But, Mama——"

"I know what you're going to say—what about me? Why, Grace, I know when to stand down and let someone younger take my place. I've heard tell of old women running hotels—running them well. There's an old lady in Vienna, so they tell me, Frau Sacher, her hotel's the meeting place of princes; another couple of old women who keep the Frau Emma in Meran, if it comes to that there's Rosa Lewis at the Clarendon in Jermyn Street, she's no chicken! But, you see, Grace, I've never been able to give orders and let that suffice. I've always wanted to *see* those orders carried out. I want to know that my stock book's in order, that my permit book is kept right,

I don't mind waiters selling champagne corks, that's a recognised thing, but I won't have them pushing poor stuff because the house promises them eighteen pence a cork.

"Things are changing; prices are changing. I'm too old to change. I doubt if I could grasp all these new rules and regulations. They've abolished the 'Long Pull,' f'instance. I never thought to see that. They strain at gnats and swallow camels. The Excise officer talking to me the other day said, 'Yes, Mrs. Forest, sell eleven and three-quarter bottles by all means,' he said, 'but not the round dozen without a permit.' I said, 'Good gracious, Mr. Swainson, whatever should I want with selling three-quarters of a bottle.' He said, 'No, but you could if you liked, eleven and three-quarter bottles, if you wished so to do.' If I wished! I never should wish. There's to be no more breaking down your own spirit. 'Thirty U.P.' Swainson said. I said, 'Thirty U.P. It will be all U.P. if we try to foist that on a public like mine at the Royal Lion.' What have I trained my cellar-men for, I'd like to know? To measure spirits out of a bottle into a little tiddly measure!

"There'll be nothing left for them to do but tap barrels, and stoop 'em. How many of 'em in ten years' time will know how to *clear* beer? What will they know about fish bones? Nothing. Why, the beer itself is that full of chemicals; the one thing you can be certain you'll never find in it will be a hop flower. No, once the war's over, I shall retire. I've got my eye on a nice house; Fairway on the Malford Road. It will be very nice for Percy and me, and Miss Armitage. I've made money, and I shall sit back and enjoy some of it." Then, suddenly anxious, "You'll take a real interest in the Royal Lion, Grace?"

Grace, conscious that she was deeply moved, rose and kissed the soft old cheek.

"Mama, I shall love it."

"Aye, I believe you will. There's some fine stabling, out at the back. This man of yours, m' dear, he knows something about horses. That might give him an—an interest. Teaching riding, hunters for hire and so on."

As the train carried her back to Sunchester, Grace thought much of Elizabeth Forest. The old monarch, preparing to lay aside the sceptre which she had wielded for so long. The years had laid their hands on her, she felt the weight too much, she wanted rest and tranquillity. She had borne the burden and heat of the day, she had toiled and schemed, planned and contrived, she had faced disappointment, disillusionment, the death

of her son and of her grandson without flinching, and now—she admitted that she was tired.

Grace could visualise the stiffly-furnished yet comfortable room, where no changes had been permitted, perhaps because in a changing world Elizabeth Forest clung to her 'what-nots,' her china, her indifferent pictures, regarding them as signs of permanence. She could see the old woman, her white hair smoothly parted, her eyes behind their glasses still very bright, her soft pink and white cheeks, and her hands with the knuckles swollen with rheumatism—the rheumatism she both resented and accepted as a sign of increasing years. She could still hear the old voice protesting against the innovations imposed upon an industry which she had studied so carefully, in such detail.

She belonged, Grace thought, to the old order. The old order of hotel-keepers who specialised in everything which touched their business. In 1892 she had been merely the widow of James Forest, she had known little except the dispensing of linen, and the ordering of housemaids and chamber maids. Without help she had set to work to understand completely the running of an hotel, she had learnt how to break down spirits, she had taught herself how to recognise the difference between good and bad cellar-work, she had been quick to realise the value of good wines. Hers were famous. Her home farm which supplied her hotels with country produce was noted for being modern and up-to-date in every particular. She had retained her dignity, she had lived down the narrow provincial belief that a woman "wanted a man at the back of her." She had been sufficient, she had been autocratic, she had fortified her ability with carefully gathered knowledge. And now—she was ready to lay down the burden which she had carried so gallantly for a quarter of a century.

'She is ready to wait for the end of her life,' Grace thought, 'while I am facing the real beginning of mine.'

Thoughts of her mother-in-law—how impossible it seemed that she had ever been Elizabeth Forest's son's wife!—faded, to be replaced by brighter, more attractive dreams of what the future might hold. The Royal Lion, that age-old inn, brought up-to-date by its present owner, and yet never sacrificing its character—the loose boxes, the stables filled with good horses, Ivor in charge, with a little army of efficient grooms. Elizabeth's rooms, modernised and refurnished, housing Ivor and herself, comfortable, bright havens, where they might sit and discuss the day's

doings. Rooms where they could make plans for the future, where they might devise small improvements, alterations, and innovations.

She smiled when she thought of her life in the future. No great impersonal hotel—but a place which she could control without enlisting the service of a battalion of superior employees. Long, busy days, pleasant talk with the customers, men she had known all through her life. The knowledge that Ivor was happy, growing in popularity, regarded as “a sound man” when it came to buying and selling horses. Perhaps a small kennel added, where his beloved Marguerite de Valois might rear successive litters of puppies, each one promising to be as beautiful as their mother. She visualised Ivor returning from some show, displaying proudly a blue ticket inscribed, “The best dog in the show—Buckingham Duke—Royal Lion Kennels.” A long list of champions—so many splendid names waiting for them—Porthos, Athos, Aramis, d’Artagnan, and so on—to Dumas père, Dumas fils—the list was endless.

Soon, very soon, Ivor would be home. Together they would stand in the shabby little city church of Saint Jude, in Sun-chester, and the rather mumbling old vicar would make them man and wife. She had written to Ivor asking if he would not prefer to be married by a registrar; his indignant protest had surprised her.

“No, it’s got to be a church. I shouldn’t feel being married by some snuffy old man in a dirty collar and a shocking tie was lucky. I’m not a religious bloke, but I feel like being one when I think that I’m going to marry you. It’s the greatest thing that has ever happened, and I want a ceremony.”

In a later letter he wrote, “I wish we were Catholics, then Martin might have wangled leave and married us. Still—we can’t change quickly enough for that.”

Gladys was coming over from Callingly, Percy was going to give Grace away, young Mr. Edward Mellor was to be Ivor’s best man. No one else. A quick luncheon at the Majestic in her private room, and then they would drive away to the Lakes—to an hotel with the water at the end of the garden, with the fussy little steamers going and coming at the tiny quay, where in the distance the great hills seemed to form a rampart to prevent the world intruding on their privacy.

The darkness would descend, making the hills vague and indistinct, from a tree a bird half asleep would call suddenly breaking the silence. The lights on the farther shore would

flicker and go out one by one, the sound of the water lapping the lake side would seem like a lullaby. The Majestic, her business worries and activities, her difficulties and problems, would seem dream-like in quality and very distant. The world would hold only herself and Ivor. Long days would lie ahead, days which must be crowded with happiness and packed with memories. She would take dozens of photographs of Ivor—she, who had always despised people who never moved without a camera in their hands. Ivor with Marguerite de Valois; Ivor lighting his pipe, his face intent and serious; Ivor in the car—a new car, her wedding present to him; Ivor looking up suddenly, laughing and screwing up his eyes because the sun was slanting into them.

She sighed with content, and the elderly man sitting opposite to her glanced at her, then smiled because he realised that her sigh had nothing in common with regret.

'That's not only a good-looking woman,' he decided. 'She's a happy woman. I wonder what's pleasing her?'

II

It was over, they were seated round the table in her dining-room at the Majestic. She had sent a quick glance flying to Ivor's face during the service, it had been grave and strangely young, as if he were trying desperately to concentrate on every word which the old clergyman spoke. Again she had felt that queer sense of longing to protect Ivor, to atone to him for everything; again she had felt that the years had slipped from him leaving him very young and defenceless. As they drove home he had scarcely spoken, only held her hand and said, "It's true—it is true. Tell me that it is, and that you're glad."

She smiled at him. "Don't I look glad?"

He nodded. "I believe that you do—that you are."

Together with Percy and Edward Mellor they inspected wedding presents laid out in Grace's drawing-room. Edward Mellor, limping about the room, kept saying, "By Jove, that's nice," and "I say, that's pretty good!" Grace wondered, half-amused, if any of Ivor's friends were capable of stringing a complete sentence together. Yet Ivor said that Edward Mellor was "not only damned clever, but one of the very best."

The gentle chorus continued, "That's jolly nice, eh?"

"That's Percy's present—and this is from Martin."

"By Jove—stunning!—And this?"

"What, the canteen of silver? Such lovely silver too—that's from Mrs. Forest—only one of her many presents."

"I say—sporting old lady."

Ivor said, "Yes—and, Teddie—bride to the bridegroom—that's me, by the way——" they both laughed, "new car, or almost. Talbot. Going to drive to the Lakes."

"Almost new car—marvellous. Won't be able to drive very fast, eh?"

Ivor's engaging grin. Obviously he felt that he was about to score heavily. "Wrong, m'lad. Oh, its run in. Grace thinks of everything, what?"

"Rather—run in, eh? Good."

But Edward Mellor's eyes rested on Grace with admiration. She had proved her real value. A woman who actually had sufficient foresight to have a car run in!

Her hands went up to the pearls which Ivor had given her. Smooth, and almost warm to the touch.

She had exclaimed when she had first seen them.

"My dear—how lovely they are! But you ought not to have——"

He grinned. "I robbed a bank—no, I went off with the regimental funds. The police 'ul be here any minute." Later he confessed that he had "cashed in" on his life policy in order to buy them.

"Cashed in? Do you mean that you've realized it?"

He was vague. "Well, it was one of those endowment affairs. Didn't fall due for another three years. No good waiting three years to give you a wedding present, was it?"

She had shown them to Annie. "Aren't they beautiful, Annie?"

Annie pursed her lips. "Aye—luv'ly is as luv'ly does. They do say as pearls means tears. Let's 'ope fur t'best—that's all we can do after all."

"Oh, Annie, don't be a misery!"

"Nay, Ah'm not that! Ah'm sure Ah 'ope with all me 'eart as you'll 'ave a reit 'appy life before yer."

Only James had been able to depress her. James had come from Brighton to see her, bringing Edith and little Francis. He had kissed her affectionately, he had presented with some ceremony the gift which he and Edith had brought with them, he had told Francis, barely a year old, to "Give Grandma her present."

Edith, pink and white, blue-eyed and plump, had laughed her fat, contented chuckle.

"Poor little thing—how can he know what you mean, James?"

Grace said, "And, darlings, need he be taught to call me *Grandma*. It's so hideous!"

James stared. "What would you prefer?"

She felt suddenly shy, felt that she had been foolish.

"Oh—Grandmother—or Granny or even Gran."

"I dislike abbreviations," James said.

Edith chuckled again. "Old silly—what's Grandma but an abbreviation? I think Gran is nice."

Later, while Edith superintended the child's bath and supper, James talked seriously to his mother.

"I am a little disturbed that you should be married from the Majestic, Mother."

"Why disturbed?" She spoke lightly, trying to shake him out of his pomposity, but she knew that her nerves were taut, ready to snap. She was thankful that Ivor would not arrive until the next day. James had announced his intention of leaving early. She felt that James would have no more in common with Ivor than Ivor would have with James.

"Surely that question is unnecessary, the answer is obvious."

"Not to me, my dear."

He moved uneasily. "I don't want to rake up old scandals. Everyone here must remember. My father only died two years ago after all."

She braced herself to reply calmly, "You mean that people will remember Ivor's first wife?"

"I do. I think, forgive me, the whole thing is a little—well—unfortunate, Mother. I do really—honestly."

"Conventionally, perhaps," Grace said, "not honestly. What your father did, what Ivor's wife did, has nothing to do with us. We cannot be penalised because other people behaved as they did."

"Unfortunately people are penalised for what other people do," he replied. "That's the way of the world."

"Then it's a wrong way," she retorted, "and perhaps we had better leave it at that, James."

"But why be married from *here*?" His face was flushed, she saw his whole body stiffen with annoyance. "Filling everyone's mouth. I made up my mind to speak to you about it. The staff, the guests—a nice story it will make for the smoking room!"

"I shan't hear the story," Grace answered. "By the time I come back people will have stopped talking, and if they haven't—well, why should it matter to me? James, my dear, don't you think that you are being rather impertinent, and more than a little vulgar? I do, and I resent it."

"I wonder what Grandmama thinks about it!" He was growing angry, she could see the likeness in his fair, flushed face to his father. Like Fred, when he lost his temper he began to bluster. "I should think she's pretty furious about it all; and Uncle Percy and Uncle Martin and Aunt Eleanor."

"Percy will be at the wedding, Martin has written sending me"—she corrected herself—"sending *us* his blessing and his love, and Grandmama wants us to stay a night at the Royal Lion as we come back from the Lakes."

He sprang to his feet, Grace noticed with a spasm of pity how awkwardly he moved, as if the loss of his arm made him clumsy and lacking in balance.

"By God, that's a bit thick!" he cried. "To stay at the Lion!"

The inadequate, school-boy expression dimmed her anger. After all James, in spite of his pomposity, was only a boy, twenty-one was very young. A rather stupid, conventionally-minded boy. Grace rose and laid her hand on his shoulder, "James dear, don't spoil my happiness. I've waited for it such a long time."

His face cleared, he stared at her, his eyes showing surprise, without hostility. For a moment he did not speak, then said, "No, all right. Sorry. Of course I want you to be happy, Mother."

Now she was sitting at Ivor's side at the round table in her dining-room. She could feel his knee touching hers, when he moved his arm brushed hers, when she looked across the table her eyes met her daughter's. Gladys was smiling, looking happy and content. Even Percy raised his glass, nodding and saying, "The very best of luck, Grace, and you deserve every bit of it. I offer you my love and Mama's and Martin's."

Ivor said, "Ah, Martin—wish he was with us. Grand lad, Martin."

Edward Mellor agreed. "Stout feller, Martin."

Then everything moved quickly, like a rapidly flicking cinematograph. Percy kissing her, Gladys catching her in her arms, whispering, "Darling, darling Mother." Edward Mellor nodding, saying: "And the very best, Mrs. Masters. G'luck—heaps of

g'luck." Annie fussing with bags, wiping her eyes with the back of a red hand. "It's pro'p'ly upset me, this 'as. Ah 'ope as Mr. Masters—Captin, I oughter say—is a good driver. T'roads is reit treacherous they tell me. Well, God bless you, Mum—'E knows as yer've bin a good friend ter me, choose 'ow." The car shining in the pale sunlight, Ivor showing it off with pride to Edward Mellor, porters carrying out bags, Ivor superintending the stowing of them, laughing and showing his white teeth. "Let me see that no one's been playing any funny games with old slippers," he said. The porters laughed as if he'd made a good joke, and said in chorus, "No, sir; all right be'ind, sir. Everything all Sir Garnet, sir. Thank you, sir; good luck."

Out of the town, on to the long straight road, heading for the North. The air growing clearer, fresher, trees showing vivid spring green, hills in the distance. Grace leant back, felt the sense of tension leaving her, she was relaxed, consciously happy. Once Ivor glanced at her, smiling. "Nice, eh?"

"Wonderful."

"This is only the beginning of everything."

"I know——"

The hills were nearer now, clear and free from cloud, there were stone walls bordering the fields, the sheep were smaller than those Grace knew round Sunchester; small, compact, with strangely alert faces and darting movements.

She breathed, "Oh, the loveliness of the green everywhere."

"That's because someone washed everything last night, ready for you."

A long grey stone wall, a patch of bad road, with trees planted on either side, a twisting lane, then the glimpse of water through the branches of the trees, blue and serene.

"We're almost there."

An open gate, a drive edged with bushes, their leaves dark glossy green, an open space, he drew up with a little spatter of gravel.

"Get out this side and look," he said.

She stood at his side, before them stretched the lake, and in the distance she saw the fussy little steamer leaving the farther shore. Calm, blue and untroubled the water lay with only a lazy ripple to stir its surface. The shores were fringed with the dark trunks and branches of the firs, with here and there sudden brilliant patches where the young larches stood in their spring green.

Ivor slipped his arm through hers. "Pretty good spot, eh?"

"Lovely—lovely."

"Your room looks over this way."

She twisted round, looked him squarely in the eyes. "You've been here before?"

He nodded, his face untroubled. "Yes—once. I knew a chap who had some shooting near here. Marguerite and I stayed here because his house was full up. Gosh, we'd forgotten her. Look there, what a little lady, sitting there on the back seat as good as gold."

He snapped his fingers and the dog leapt from the car and came to his side. He stooped and gently pulled her ears. "Like it, old lady? Remember it? I bet she does."

Then again he slipped his arm through Grace's, and his fingers closed over hers.

"Don't ever worry," he said softly. "I shouldn't make gaffes like—well, like you feared. I don't want to remember. All that is *then*, all this is *now*. We've both been through some pretty bad nightmares—well, now we're awake, ready to enjoy everything. There isn't any room for us to have fears—anyway there aren't any fears left. That nice old bloke in church this morning sent them flying—they shan't come back, my dearest."

CHAPTER XX

GRACE

THEY had driven out to a small lake, high up in the hills. They had eaten luncheon, sitting there on the short sheep-cropped turf, with the faint scent of the wild herbs reaching their nostrils, half sweet, half acid. The air was soft, a tiny breeze touched their cheeks, tender as a caress. Above the great white galleons of clouds sailed through a sea of blue.

Ivor said, "If nothing ever went right for me again—if I were snuffed out—I'd not grumble because I've had this—and you."

Startled, half-distressed, Grace laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't—don't say those things."

"What? Snuffed out? Well, I might be. The Hun is no respecter of persons, darling. We've got to face up to everything."

She said quietly, "I should die——"

"No," he told her, "you wouldn't, you couldn't. You can't die to order."

"Part of me would die—the part that is really me."

He said, very gently, "It might come alive again."

"Come alive again. Ivor—you don't think that—oh, I can't bear to say it!—if you weren't here, there could ever be someone else in my life to take your place!"

He slipped his arm round her and drew her to him. "No, not to take my place. But there are lots of rooms in a house, and if one is closed—you furnish another. You can't have a lot of empty rooms, it makes a place so—so unfriendly."

"That depends upon whether you have sufficient wish, energy, interest to furnish other rooms. You might be so indifferent that you just left them empty, for the mice and the spiders. Oh, why are we talking like this? I hate it so. Do you think that I don't torture myself sufficiently, that I don't count the minutes and grudge every one because it brings me sixty seconds nearer to the time when you will have to leave me?"

He took her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"Here, here," he said reproachfully. "I can't have you making me a coward. You've precious nearly made me one already. I don't think that fighting men ought to be married—like priests. Since I knew you, fell in love with you, I've often had to fight pretty hard with myself, y'know, not to—take care of myself. That feeling—'oh, let the other chap do it—he hasn't got a woman at home that he's in love with.' It's all wrong, naturally if you've any decency left you fight it down, but it's there."

"Do you hate it all, Ivor?"

"Hate it?" he said thoughtfully. "Only because Kaiser Bill and his lads take me away from you. I rather enjoy the rest of it. Oh, the filth's not so nice, and the wet, and the mud—God, I hate the mud!—but the rest—well, it's not a bad life."

"But killing men," Grace exclaimed, "you can't like that!"

"No"—doubtfully—"only you see, you don't think of it as killing men. You think of it as—beating the enemy. If the chap is fighting a big fight, in the ring, y'know, he doesn't think: 'Hello, if I do this it 'ul hurt the other feller.' He thinks: 'If I can knock him out, I shall have won.' I don't believe that Hans or Fritz wants to kill Johnnie or Jimmie, any more than Johnnie or Jimmie want to kill Hans or Fritz. But they want to score off the German army, and the individual in the German

army wants to score off the British army. That's the size of it—as I see it."

"But you do kill one another just the same," she objected again.

"I know, that's the game. It's the rule. I've played footer with chaps I know and liked enormously. I've barged into a chap, when I was going for the ball. I've known that he went a most almighty purler, stuck his nose into the ground, and made it pour with blood. He skinned his knees, put his collar-bone out. I didn't do it because I wanted to hurt him, I did it because it was the game."

She sighed. "War's such a stupid game."

"Well, the world's one thousand and nine hundred years old—more some people say, and none of these clever blokes have found out any other way to settle quarrels between nations," he said.

"That doesn't say there isn't any other way."

"No, I admit that. The job is to *find* the other way. Believe me, the soldier is the very feller who doesn't want war. Financiers may, politicians may, soldiers most certainly don't. Why should they?"

Speaking in a voice devoid of colour, she said, "Legalised murder."

Ivor Masters laughed. "Booby! That's a catch phrase. Lots of bad things are legalised. Legal highway robbery, legal swindles, legal trickery, legal blackmail—and the more legal it is, the damn worse it is."

"One day a way will be found to stop wars."

"There *is* a way now. Give every man work, enough money to live on as his wage, sufficient time for recreation. Don't let anyone have the fear of hunger—to say nothing of starvation—sitting for ever on their shoulders, don't have more goods made than can be sold in the world's markets, and—who the hell 'ul want to go to war? Damn few, and they could be locked up as lunatics."

It was seldom that she could persuade him to talk of the war, of his life in France, he said that the damned war intruded everywhere, that he wanted to forget it, and only remember that they were together. He didn't, Grace came to the conclusion, like thinking very much. Mentally he was lazy, he preferred to ignore anything which was either unpleasant or disturbing. His creed was that if you ignored anything for a sufficiently long time it ceased to exist. When anything faced him, he would combat it

with a certain amount of energy, and once the effort had been made—forget it.

Stories of his dogs, of horses he had known, point-to-point races in which he had ridden, farm management, crops and the like were things of which he loved to talk. He could talk intelligently and even vividly of these things, but when she tried to question him about the winter in France, the battles in which he had fought, the hardships which he had undergone, his reply was invariably, "Why talk about it? It was damned unpleasant, and damned dirty, and—thank God it's over!"

Yet he was acutely sensitive, and almost unbelievably anxious to please her in every way. She noticed that he drank very moderately, and realised that often when he refused a drink he would watch her for some sign of approbation. His pleasure when she thanked him, praised him for anything which he did, struck her as being almost pathetic. His tenderness and solicitude towards her never ceased to astonish and touch her.

"No woman in the world," she said to him one night when she lay with his arms round her, "ever had such a wonderfully tender lover."

She heard his soft, half-confused laugh. When he spoke his voice was pitched so low that she could scarcely catch the words.

"I don't know," he said. "I should be a queer kind of chap if I didn't try to be reasonably decent. You see you give me—everything. I've not been particularly straight-laced, I've knocked about a lot, taken my fun where I found it, but I never dreamed that love could be—well, like it is with you. It's like finding a new world, a world you never thought existed."

"Would you like to have had children?" she whispered.

"I dunno—honestly I don't. I should hate a child that took you away from me, I should be so damned jealous. I should be worried sick, I should sweat with fear every time I thought about it—y'know before it came—but it would be rather nice. You'd always matter most though, any child would play second fiddle to you."

II

Then suddenly it was their last day by the lake, they were packing, driving back to Callingly, going back to the world again.

"I think that I'm beginning to be frightened," Grace told Ivor as they drove South into Yorkshire, towards Callingly.

He said, "Frightened? What—of the old lady? Surely not. Trust me, I've a great success with old ladies."

"No!" impatiently, "frightened because in two days you won't be here."

He slowed the car to a standstill, and twisting in his seat, took her hands, looking into her eyes.

"You're not to be frightened," he said gravely. "I ought to tell you to remember that you're a soldier's wife, only that's a lot of bunk, because soldiers aren't any braver than miners or sailors, or bus drivers. They have more opportunities to do things, that's all. But it's my duty not to show that I'm afraid, and it's your duty not to show me that you are. I once heard a poem, or part of one, it said, 'Let us have no moaning at the bar when I put out to sea'—that's right—of course there was a lot more to it. You see what I mean?"

She hadn't the heart to correct his mis-quotation, but the imputation of the words shook her.

"Put out to sea," she repeated. "Ivor, how can you say such things to me! You're being morbid. You're not going to put out to sea."

"Something very wrong with your geography," he said. "Of course I am. What's the Channel but the sea, and how am I to get France if I don't put out on the English Channel—tell me that will you?"

"But when Tennyson wrote that poem he didn't mean the Channel."

"I don't say that he did, but he meant some sea or other. And we won't have any moaning, because we're neither of us the moaning kind. There'll be other leaves, and other good times, and that's what we've got to hang on to. There—kiss me, and promise to be good."

Elizabeth was glad to see them; she had made great preparations, she had brought out some of her finest wines and an old brandy which was almost beyond price. Grace listened to her husband talking to the old woman, her heart warm and filled with pleasure. Ivor might be stupid—he would have been the first to agree that he had no intellect—his knowledge was terribly limited, but he knew how to listen intelligently, he knew how to tease and flatter Elizabeth Forest, and even the stories which he told her of his life in France were light-hearted and amusing.

"It seems to me," Mrs. Forest said, "that some of you have a very nice time out there."

"A grand time," Ivor assured her, "lots of fun, lots of good fellows, and just a spot of danger at long intervals to give an extra spice to life. I can tell you that some of us will be very sorry to see the end of the war."

She looked at him, her eyes twinkling. "You among 'em, eh?"

He laughed. "Well—even to make Grace angry, I can't promise that I shall be sorry. Particularly as you've got this ostler's job waiting for me. I shall wear breeches and a striped waistcoat. I shall probably chew a straw."

"Get along with you," Elizabeth retorted. "Ostler indeed! You'll buy some good horses, and make a really smart stable here, that's what you'll do."

Grace, listening to them, knew that she was listening too, to the ticking of the gilt clock under its glass shade which stood on the mantelpiece, flanked by two vases also covered with glass. Each time the clock ticked, she told herself, the time left for her to spend with Ivor was decreasing, each time it struck its little tinkling chime it marked that another hour had slipped away.

"Let me come to London, let me see you go," she begged.

He shook his head. "No—I can't. Grace, be kind, I couldn't bear it. That crowded station, filled with men who are leaving their wives, their sweethearts—women who are watching them go, breaking their hearts. No, I couldn't stand it. Here, in this room, where we've been happy—that's where we'll say good-bye. That's what I want to take away—a picture to take out and look at sometimes.

"The wall-paper with the little bunches of roses, the big dressing-table covered with your brushes and boxes, the big wardrobe—when I open it the scent from your dresses comes out like a sweet smelling wave—you must never, never use any other scent—that big friendly bed, where you've laid in my arms, where you've given me so much happiness. No—this is what I want to remember, not Victoria Station, women crying, men with tight lips. A place where unhappiness can be cut with a knife."

That night she could not sleep; again and again she felt Ivor stir, heard his voice gently protesting, "Darling—why don't you go to sleep?"

"I can't."

"And I feel such a hog because I can."

"You must; you've a long day before you."

"And you——"

"To-morrow won't matter whether I sleep or wake. It will be hell."

He slept again, while she lay there, her hand touching the back of his neck where the crisp hair grew into a little point; he said that it was like a drake's tail. Her fingers caressed his cheek, felt the harsh stubble of beard, and the sudden smoothness of his neck with its strong muscles.

She thought, 'This is agony. I've never known such pain. It's intolerable—I love him too much. I can't bear it.'

Towards morning she fell asleep, and woke to find him propped on his elbow watching her face intently.

"It's—morning?"

He nodded. "Nearly eight o'clock. I must dress."

The hour flew past, again and again Grace thought, 'It isn't true, it can't be true,' until he was holding her in his arms; she could hear the creaking of the leather of his Sam Browne as he strained her to him, saying "Good-bye."

"Don't come down to the hall," he begged. "Stay up here. I'll come back, wangle leave soon. We'll have grand times—fun. Smile, my loveliest, smile. God bless you."

She kissed him, his lips felt cold. She shivered.

"Go—now, quickly," she said.

"I'll be all right."

She nodded. "Yes of course—go now."

She heard the door close, heard his voice saying, "Everything down? That's good. Car there?" Heard the sound of his feet as he ran down the stairs, and turning she ran to the door, wrenching the handle calling, "Ivor—Ivor—come back!"

Old Hemer standing in the hall, looked up, and said, "Did yer want the Captin, Mum? Ah doot as t'car's started." Then cocking his head, he listened, "Aye—it's started."

Grace turned back into the room, closing the door quietly.

III

She worked as she had never worked before. Annie watched her when she sat late every evening writing her daily letter to Ivor.

"Yer doin' ower mooch," she warned. "T'Captin 'ul cum back ter find yer a shadder. He'll not be best pleased, Ah'll lay."

Grace said impatiently, "Oh, be quiet, Annie—don't worry

me," then immediately reproached herself for allowing her nerves to get the better of her. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap."

"Nay, Ah tak' noa notice," Annie returned placidly.

Work was a help, a narcotic, a drug; she was only marking time until he came home again, tiring herself so that she could sleep.

He had a few days' leave in Paris, not sufficient time to get home. 'I've never liked Paris,' he wrote, 'I don't speak the language and I always feel a fool. It makes it worse because I'm certain that the waiters think I'm a fool too. Thank God for the Leave Club here. Women who speak English, and don't suspect you, on sight, of wanting to sleep with them. It's run, this club, by a woman who was an actress, and then Governor's Lady in some place in Africa. She's a miracle. They ought to make her a General. She'd wake up some of the old dug'outs. Maybe that's why they don't.'

In January 1918 he came home. Grace thought that he looked older, found new lines in his face, noticed how tired his eyes were. He asked her to meet him in London, and appeared to find the good beds and linen sheets at the Savoy the most attractive thing in London.

"Baths and good beds, and clean sheets—and lots and lots of sleep," he said. "Being with you, and those things seem to me to be all that any reasonable chap can want."

Grace felt protective, longed to be able to make him sleep without those dreadful startings into wakefulness which disturbed him. She would lie awake, dreading the moment when, shaken out of sleep by some dream, he would suddenly sit up and mutter disjointed sentences plentifully spattered with obscenities.

"Ivor—Ivor," she would catch his hand and hold it, "it's all right, you're home. I'm here."

"Yes—that's right. Sorry, did I disturb you? Must have been dreaming—so sorry."

He hated to talk of the War, only once when they were alone and she asked him about the progress which the Allies were making, did he answer her frankly.

With sombre eyes, his face looking old and haggard, he said, "I'd not say this to anyone except you. You mustn't repeat it. Things are bad, m'dear, bloody bad."

"But with the Americans——"

"I know, they're damned good fighters. But"—with a grin which held no mirth—"so is the Hun. The next months, two

or three, are going to be hell. After that well——” He shrugged his shoulders.

“You don’t mean that we can lose?”

“Oh, we *can* lose, and quite easily. Of course, we *can* win. Probably shall—but at the moment it looks as if it’s going to be damned difficult to pull it off.”

This time when he left to go back to France, it was Grace who had to comfort him; he was apprehensive, he said that it was so much more difficult to leave her this time than it had been before.

“I know you better, love you far more. It’s horrible to have to go. Oh, duty—to hell with it! You matter more to me than anything else in the world. I only want to be with you, to live quietly, happily. Who are these damned people who drag us into wars, what are the damned wars for anyway? Who’ll benefit?”

Then he would regret what he had said, protest that he was a fool to grow down-hearted, declare that there was not the slightest doubt of the outcome of the war. “We shall win—there’s no question about it. Germany ’ul pack up suddenly, mark my words. I wouldn’t be out of it for worlds.”

She could never decide which she hated most; his despondency, or his slightly over-done boastfulness. Neither rang quite true in her ears. Neither, she felt, were true reflections of his real thoughts and feelings. For the rest, he was as kind, as gentle, as obviously in love with her as ever. Again and again, she told herself that, had the war not obtruded so often and so forcefully, this leave was even more perfect than their honeymoon had been. It was music to her to listen to him planning what they would do—“when it’s all over.” At those times his face lost its look of strain, his whole body seemed to relax, and his voice grew brighter and filled with enthusiasm.

The whole leave was a queer, kaleidoscopic time. There were moments of complete unreality when they met his friends, home on leave like himself, and she listened to their talk, which seemed so pathetically artificial and optimistic. Strange, too, to hear men who were so evidently kindly, courteous and essentially decent, talking lightly, even brutally, of slaughter. Again, when they sat in the stalls of a theatre, listening to some musical comedy, when Ivor laughed until he cried at the comedian’s jokes, and seemed to have forgotten that war and separation existed. Dining at a table with shaded lights, a profusion of silver, a small crowd of waiters in attendance, when they laughed and mocked

light-heartedly at the rationing and restrictions; behaving, Grace felt, as if the scheme of coupons was a slightly foolish whim of some elderly politician, and not dictated by the nation's shortage of food. Only when they were alone did reality seem to assert itself. Then Ivor ceased to be a creature keyed up to the limit, fiercely determined to avoid facing facts, to extract the last ounce of amusement, and distraction from everything which offered. He became the man she had known. Simple, talking in his usual short sentences, possessing the smallest vocabulary, she felt, that was commensurate with human speech and conversation; longing to be near her, to be able to stretch out his hand and touch hers, as if the contact reassured and stabilised him.

"I'm a dull dog," he said at the end of one quiet evening.

"Well, I'm not a particularly brilliant person," she smiled.

"Oh, you're clever. You've proved that. I'm just a boob. I shall never know what you saw in me."

"What I *see*," she corrected.

"It's the tenth wonder of the world."

"What is the ninth?" she asked.

"I dunno. There were nine wonders of the world, weren't there? One was the Hanging Gardens at Babylon, and I've forgotten the other eight."

"There were only seven."

"I'm certain you're wrong. To-morrow we'll go to some library and find out. You don't know everything."

But in the morning he had forgotten all about it, and only remembered that he must go to Cox's to get some more money.

His leave ended, again she faced the heartbreak, which was intensified this time. He swore that she must not come to the station, then in a kind of panic begged that she would do so. "I can't give up ten minutes of being with you. Can you bear it? Will you come with me?"

He held her hand so tightly as they drove to Victoria, that she felt her rings cutting into the flesh of her fingers, he scarcely spoke, but sat staring ahead of him, with compressed lips, and hard, unblinking eyes. Once at the station, Grace felt that they were swallowed up in a sea of luggage, of khaki-clad men who were, like Ivor, going back.

He barked his orders, nodded curtly to men he knew, and muttered to Grace, "If any of them come and want to talk to me, by God, I'll murder them." Then he relapsed into silence, smoking a cigarette very quickly, and flinging it away before it

was half finished. Someone called, "Coming in here, Masters? Right—I'll keep a seat for you."

He said, "Thanks," then to Grace, "We're off in a minute. I wish I hadn't asked you to come. It's too gut-twisting. Write to me often, won't you?"

"Don't I always write—often?"

"You're an angel. Don't stop; I don't care what you write about so long as you say that you love me. Curse it—we're going. Good-bye, sweetheart. Let's begin looking forward to my next leave. We'll go to the Lakes, so pray that it's summer time. God bless you."

He held her in his arms for a moment, she smelt the scent of the shaving soap which he used, noticed, as if she had never seen them before, how flat his ears lay to his head. A voice called, "Masters—come *on*!" He turned and she saw him leap into the carriage as the train began to move. Once he waved, then drew back into the carriage, Grace turned and walked out of the station through the crowd of people who had been there, as she had been, to watch some man they loved go back to France and the war.

Again she began that systematic, hard, regular work. Again she felt that she was marking time. Again she waited for his letters. February, March—and the realisation that things were going badly. Vaguely she wondered what would happen if England and her Allies lost the war. Would the Germans kill every British officer? She didn't believe it. She couldn't visualise them as a nation composed entirely of brutes and butchers. Ivor had said, "Y'know, the Bosch isn't a bad feller, and he's a damned clever one."

She had asked, "Would you shake hands with a German after the war? So many people say they never will."

He grinned. "Some people talk a lot of bunk. I'd not wonder if in the next war we're fighting with the Germans against the French."

"Ivor, you don't believe that!"

"Why not? All this hate business is artificial. Everyone knows that. The Hun, the individual, doesn't hate Ivor Masters the individual." He laughed. "D'you know, I don't think I *hate* anyone. I don't believe that people do; they imagine they do. They're encouraged to think that they do. It's a—a myth. Stick us round a table with half a dozen British soldiers and half a dozen Germans, give us a damn good meal, and some damn good wine—and what would all this hate stuff be worth? Not

a ruddy damn, believe me. That's how politicians ought to settle international rows. Let's write to the *Times* and suggest it."

March slipped into April, April gave place to May. He wrote "I believe the tide's turned. Hush, not a word, but there's more than spring in the air, my sweet."

June, July and he was home for seven days; a Major, showing her the bit of ribbon on his tunic and assuring her that a "baker's dozen were sent to the regiment, and we drew lots. I held a lucky number."

Again his spirits were high, he seemed younger, hopeful. The war couldn't last for ever, he repeated, as if the words were a kind of article of faith. They went to the Lakes. Ivor said that everything was better, more lovely, incomparably finer than it had been before.

"This isn't happiness," he told her, "it's a kind of splendid intoxication—with no chance of waking up sober, and no hang-over."

They spent a day and night with Elizabeth Forest at the Royal Lion, Elizabeth who was proud as a peacock of Ivor and his D.S.O. Ivor had met Martin out in France, they had talked far into the night, "about all sorts of things," Ivor said. "I've an idea that there's a lot in this religion of Martin's. I'm going to think about it quite a good deal after the war."

Elizabeth said, "But you can't be a priest, Ivor!"

"Oh, I didn't say a priest, but Martin might let me swing that censer arrangement for him sometimes." He turned to Grace. "Might be rather nice to belong to Martin's Church, eh?"

He spoke as if Martin was the sole owner of the Church, Grace thought.

"It might, indeed."

Again her brief stretch of paradise was over. He was gone. Going, this time, full of hope and confidence; laughing as they stood on the platform at Victoria, nodding to men he knew, telling Grace what good fellows they were, and how "when it's over they must come and stay with us, eh?"

August, September, October—November. The eleventh. As Grace heard the factory whistles blow, and the sirens hoot, she opened the telegram which told her that he was dead.

CHAPTER XXI

FRANCIS

ELIZABETH FOREST held her younger son's hand, and sighed contentedly. "Well—I never thought that you'd get on as you have done, Martin."

Martin smiled. "Oh, I don't know that I've done so very well. I've been fortunate and my superiors have been kind. That's about the size of it."

"Nay, nay, it's more than that. Monseignor. And that purple edging, and your coloured socks and shoes with buckles, and a ring. Nothing would surprise me—no, not even if they made you Pope one day. I will say that I'm very happy about it."

"Then that's all that matters!"

She lay watching him, thinking that after all Martin—and Fred always made fun of Martin—had done as well as any of them. He had come through the war safely, he had written a book which everyone declared was wonderful about what he had seen and done, he had been made a canon, and now they—she was always vague in her own mind as to who or what "they" were—had made him Monseignor.

He was forty-five, he had broadened, even grown a little heavy, but he was a well built man, tall too, and he could carry his weight and still look dignified. She was for ever coming across his name in the paper, he was speaking here, preaching there, and twice a year his name headed his publisher's list. Claudia Bower said that he was one of the busiest men she knew, and yet—here he was—sitting beside her bedside, holding her hand, as if he had all the time in the world to waste.

She thought of her children. Except poor Fred, they'd given her very little trouble, and she could find it in her heart to forgive Fred a lot because he had married Grace and brought her into the family. Elizabeth felt her heart swell, and her eyes smart a little when she thought of Grace.

Grace Masters, widow of that poor fellow who had been killed the day before the Armistice was signed—that was seven years ago. She had planned that once the war was over Grace should come to the Royal Lion, and she would go to Green Lawns; Grace would have liked that. Then Ivor Masters had been killed, and Grace had stayed on at the Majestic; she didn't

seem to care much where she went, or where she stayed. Poor Grace. Not that she hadn't been as efficient as ever, but Elizabeth had always felt that she was trying to dull her own pain by working like a galley slave. Like some women took to drugs or drink.

She sighed, and Martin bent forward saying softly, "Nothing wrong, my dear, is there?"

"No, nothing wrong. I'm just thinking about you all."

He smiled, "Thinking nice things, I hope."

"Of course." She closed her eyes, and let her thoughts take possession of her again. Queer how sometimes her thoughts took possession of her. She just lay there, and let them rush over her mind. Sometimes they were quite clear, almost painfully vivid, but at others they were muddled, and she couldn't get them really sorted out.

Now, she could see her husband, standing before her, so erect, so carefully dressed, speaking in his quiet, firm voice.

"Mind, my dear, you must be careful or we shall have trouble with Fred."

Half impatiently, she thought, 'Oh, it's over, finished, don't let's think unkindly of Fredrick,' but the thoughts refused to be banished. Fred, who had been lost at sea—with a woman—which woman? There had been so many. She had known and always refused to admit it, she had scarcely admitted it to herself. Mrs. Matt Walker—old Matt's wife. No, she hadn't been on the ship with Fred surely. Who was it then?

Almost violently she twisted away from the thought of Fred and—some woman, and tried to concentrate on Percy. How old was Percy now? Fifty—fifty-one—fifty-two—she forgot. She knew that his birthday came in April. A good boy, Percy, he'd never given her any trouble, except over his untidy clothes and shabby ties. Never had any mistakes in his balance sheets and accounts, and now he was very busy, what with the Royal Lion, the Ring of Bells—that was where Gladys was doing so nicely, and bringing up those dear little children—Martin, and Eleanor, and little Ivor. Gladys—who did she marry—someone who worked for Claudia Bower? A pleasant kind of man—Walter—Walter—no, she couldn't remember his name.

She said, "Martin, what is Gladys' husband called?"

"Walter, Mama."

"Yes, yes," impatiently, "I know that—but what else?"

"Rivers, my dear—Walter Rivers."

"Of course—Walter Rivers."

Martin said, "Did you want to see him?"

"No—I was thinking about the hotels. How many are there now?"

"The Majestic—the Callingly at Brighton—the Scarlet Cross at Gloucester—the Royal Lion, the Ring of Bells, the Grand at Forchester—where Godfrey Crowther is—the King's Head at Blew Moor—the Lamb and Wheatsheaf at Dunford. That's eight, unless I've forgotten how to count, Mama."

"Yes, eight—that's right. Eight."

Her thoughts began again. Eleanor—she must be well turned fifty. How stout she'd grown, all her own fault too. She never stirred if she could help it. She drove everywhere. Too much money, and too little to do. Jos Benfold had left her a vast lot of money. Eleanor was a rich woman. A nice woman—but too fat. Then Edith—who was Edith Benfold? She'd married one of Grace's boys—Grace's only boy because Francis had been killed in the war. James—who managed the Callingly at Brighton. The thought of James disturbed her.

She frowned, and again Martin said, "Anything the matter, dear?"

"No, I was thinking about James. My grandson James, not your father, Martin. James is self-opinionated. He's hard—oh, he's clever, runs his hotel very well. He made me very cross when he called his youngest boy Fredrick. We had words about it, Martin."

"I shouldn't worry about that, Mama. Try to sleep."

"No, I shan't worry—I don't care a great deal for James."

Again she closed her eyes. No, she refused to worry about James. Grace didn't find him easy. Dear Grace—she was only really happy when she could persuade Edith, James' wife, to let her have Francis with her. Grace loved little Francis. Not that he was so little now. He was turned eight. Tall too. She thought, 'He's my great-grandson, Francis and George and little Freddie—all my great-grandsons. Gladys' children are my great-grand-children too. I'm getting very old—I'm nearly eighty.'

"Martin—when shall I be eighty?"

"Not for years, Mama. Not for nearly three years."

"I'm very old."

"The youngest woman I know!"

She slept, and when the door opened to admit Miss Armitage, Martin laid his finger to his lips, enjoining silence. He rose, and whispered to Miss Armitage.

"She's been very quiet and very peaceful."

"Oh, Monseignor, I'm so glad. You always do her good. Always."

"She couldn't get along without you," Martin said. "You're a good friend to her and to us."

The eyes of the elderly woman filled suddenly. "Oh, please—please don't speak like that. Look what she's been to me all these years. I don't know what I shall do without her—I don't really."

Gently he patted her narrow shoulder, then moving very softly he left the room, closing the door behind him. In the hall he met Grace. He thought what a fine woman Grace was, tall, dignified, wearing clothes which suited her, completely mistress of herself.

"Martin, this is nice! I didn't know that you were here. How is she?"

"She's very happy, quite peaceful, her memory troubles her now and then, but—no, she won't suffer, Grace dear. I saw Think this morning, he brought Sir Henry Fromer over from Leeds. Mama was quite pleased to see them. Fromer was very nice, he told me that it was just that the machinery was running down. He could give no time limit—it may be to-night, it may not be for a month."

"Oh, Martin—if only she hadn't always worked so hard. She isn't really very old—seventy-seven. Shall we have another opinion? Shall we get Lord Gorsten from London?"

He shook his head. "If it will make you happier, Grace—then of course we will, but it won't make any difference. I believe that she knows, I felt that she was trying to get all her—mental accounts in order this afternoon. She kept asking questions, and then drifting away again. Miss Armitage has just come in. Think how fortunate we are to have her. Mama would have disliked a professional nurse. Poor old Armitage, she's a devoted soul."

"Are you going to stay, Martin?"

"I can't, I wish that I could. I've to be in Middlesbrough to-night, and I go on to Leeds in the afternoon of to-morrow. Then I can get back again for a couple of days."

"I shall be glad to have you back. Percy is very good, but he gets so distressed and shows his distress. I'm afraid that he may worry her. And Eleanor, of course, always resents a little that anyone should be ill except herself!"

He laughed. "Poor Eleanor! I must go, or miss my

train. I've given Miss Armitage my addresses—in case you want me. God bless you, Grace dear."

II

Elizabeth opened her eyes, she felt suddenly much stronger, and surprised with the realisation which had come to her. The room seemed very dark, but she could discern Martin's face bending over her.

"Martin——"

"Yes, Mama."

"I'm dying!" She felt his hand holding hers, fancied that the pressure of his fingers increased a little. "You won't make me a Catholic, Martin, will you? I shouldn't understand it."

"No, of course not. . . . No one shall do anything you don't wish."

"Is Grace there?"

"Grace is here, and Percy and Eleanor—and your dear Miss Armitage."

"Yes—that's right. You must all take care of Miss Armitage. She's been my friend ever since your father died." She paused. "I'm very comfortable, Martin, very comfortable indeed. I've always said that it pays to buy really good beds. Have them remade every two years. Remember that, Grace—every two years."

"Of course, Mama. I won't forget."

"I wish the strike would end, Grace."

"It was settled this morning, all settled."

Elizabeth sighed. "The world's in a queer way. Working men have to live." Again she paused and drew a deep breath. "It's hard for them to watch rich folks eating and drinking well, when their own bairns have empty stomachs. Aye—it's all past me. Maybe one day they'll get it put right. Not in my time though."

She closed her eyes, the room was very still, the silence only broken by a smothered sob from Eleanor Benfold. Martin, still holding his mother's hand, stood upright, pressing his free hand into the small of his back. Grace made a motion indicating that she would hold Elizabeth's hand. Martin smiled and shook his head. Percy, white-faced and shaking a little, whispered, asking if she were asleep.

Again Martin shook his head. "Her hand is getting very cold,"

he said softly. Then, as Eleanor's vast frame shook with another sob, "Don't cry, Eleanor. She's not in any pain."

Wilfred Thirk standing near the bed, his eyes watching Elizabeth, said, without turning, "No—no, Mrs. Benfold—no pain at all."

Grace said, "She's moving," and as Elizabeth's eyes opened, she bent over her. "Is there anything you'd like, Mama?"

"Is Martin there? Say a nice prayer, Martin love. Not in Latin—I shouldn't understand it."

"No, in English, my dear—a prayer that belongs to us all." He knelt down, still holding her hand, and in that beautiful mellow voice which had held so many congregations spell-bound, said very clearly, and simply: "Our Father, Who art in Heaven——"

Her lips moved as, silently, she repeated the words after him.

When the prayer ended, she said, "Thank you, that was very nice. Very nice. Be good children. Be kind to one another—and Miss Armitage." Then with increasing difficulty, "We all want—justice, and—mercy. God—bless you—Good night."

Dr. Thirk stepped forward and took Elizabeth's hand from Grace. Again there was silence in the room, once Martin thought that he heard his mother sigh. A moment later Thirk laid her hand down, and looking at Martin said softly, "It's over—she's left us."

"May her soul, and the souls of all the faithful rest in peace."

No one spoke except Grace, who answered Martin calmly and very clearly, "Amen."

III

Martin drove back to Sunchester with Grace. The days which followed Elizabeth Forest's death and her funeral had been trying for them both. Eleanor Benfold had retired to her comfortable bed, where a young and attractive doctor from Rakegate assured her that she needed rest, and prescribed tonics for her shattered nerves. James had arrived from Brighton, bringing with him his wife and son. James had been pompous and exacting. He seemed to assume that no one in the family, with the exception of himself, could grasp the intricacies of Mrs. Forest's will. He had visited Lawyer Swan, and came back scarlet in

the face and furiously angry. Amos Swan, he said, was a doddering old fool, past his work, practically senile.

Martin listened and chuckled. "Amos can still drive as hard a bargain as any man in Yorkshire," he said. "He's going to make young Vane as smart as himself, before he has finished with him."

James retorted, "Neither Swan nor young Vane have a penn'orth of manners between them. They can't give a civil answer to a civil question. I've a perfect right to know something about my grandmother's will, haven't I?"

With unimpaired good humour Martin said, "You'll know when Amos Swan reads the will, my dear boy. Be patient." Then more gravely, "This anxiety—and my mother only dead two days ago—isn't in the best possible taste, James."

"If she has left more than is right and proper to your Church, Uncle Martin, I warn you, I shall contest the will!"

"And who is to decide what is—right and proper, James?"

"The Courts!"

Martin rose; it struck Percy who sat watching and listening, what a big man Martin was, not only in size but possessing a great dignity, perfectly assured, refusing to be in the least ruffled.

"My dear James—how very unpleasant all this is! Forgive me, if I leave you, Percy."

As the door closed, Percy said furiously, "You young jackass, d'you think you can talk like that to Martin? He's in the stronger position. He doesn't care if Mama hasn't left him a penny—apparently you do! Mind your own business, my lad. If there's any arguing to be done, Martin and Eleanor and I will do it among ourselves. And there won't be any—let me tell you that. Now—shut up and mind your own business, if you please."

James sulked, and at intervals grew sentimental over his dead grandmother. Grace met him holding Francis by the hand, mounting the stairs to visit the room where Elizabeth's body lay. Francis was white to the lips, his eyes holding something which amounted to terror.

"I am taking Francis to see his great-grandmother for the last time," James said.

"Did he ask to see her?" Grace said.

Francis shivered suddenly. "No, grandmother—I didn't. Need I? I don't want to."

"Then you shan't go," Grace told him. "You remember great-grandmama, don't you? Quite well?"

Francis nodded. "Yes, quite well. She always laughed about things, and told me to grow up like my great-grandpapa."

Grace held out her hand. "Come along with me," she said. "I know where Miss Armitage keeps a tin of ginger snaps."

Speaking quietly, but with intense anger in his voice, James said, "You are encouraging my son to disobey me, Mother. You're encouraging him to be cowardly. You're refusing to allow him to see his great-grandmother for the last time. I resent your attitude."

"As I resent yours," she replied coolly. "Come, Francis."

He had been officious concerning the funeral arrangements. John Wheatley, the undertaker, a solid man who was well versed in all the niceties of place and precedence appertaining to funerals, came to Grace in genuine distress.

"Mrs. Masters, I dunno rightly whether I'm on my head or my heels. I don't want to worry you, at such a time, but Mr. James is driving me crazy. I said to him this morning, I said, 'Listen, Mr. James—I managed very nicely during the influenza epidemic, when I was short-handed, couldn't get coffins made, and had seven funerals a week—and,' I said, 'I can manage now—if I'm left to manage in my own way'."

"I'll speak to my son, Mr. Wheatley. Don't worry."

Twenty times a day James asked questions and made suggestions. "Is anyone making a complete list of people who have sent flowers?" "Who is taking charge of the letters and telegrams? They must all be answered." "Is it necessary to provide the staff—cellar-men, and barmen with black ties? It seems unnecessary extravagance to me."

"What arrangements are being made with regard to the—er—refreshments for the guests after the funeral?"

It was Miss Armitage who answered him. "Mr. James, your dear grandmama honoured me with complete instructions regarding the luncheon which was to follow the ceremony. Mr. Percy knows all about it—and approves."

"Might I ask what the instructions are?" James demanded.

"Certainly. Everything is to be done in the Royal Lion tradition." She rolled out the words with pride. "Cold salmon with a salad and chef's famous dressing. Saddle of lamb, or loin of same, fresh vegetables—Haricots verts, pommes nouvelles, and petits pois. Petits fours, and various fruit tarts. And—coffee."

"And wine?" His tone was heavily sarcastic.

"Certainly, Mr. James—according to Mrs. Forest's wish. We have a very fine *amontillado*, a *Château Olivier*, and a *Lafon Rochet*. A *Courvoisier '75* will be served with the coffee. Oh, the *Royal Lion* won't disgrace that dear woman, believe me," she added with a sudden break in her voice. "There shan't be a single thing not exactly as she'd have wished it. All the staff feel the same."

"I think the whole thing is barbarous in the extreme! A crowd of countrymen swilling and guzzling! I should have thought that we had progressed farther than that."

Grace interrupted him. "I think we can trust the 'crowd of countrymen' neither to swill nor to guzzle, James. Thank you, Miss Armitage—it sounds exactly what Mama would have wished."

Now, driving back with Martin, both of them silent, Grace went back over the events of the day. The arrival of the men and women who had come to pay respect and prove their affection for Elizabeth Forest. Claudia Bower, with her short, stout little secretary, Swathford delivering his sympathetic if formal little speech, names she had known all her life—Vanes, Mellors, Illings, and Blattlys. Amos Swan, Dr. Thirk, little Basinetti, George Hartley from Gloucester, Godfrey Crowther from Forchester—the room was filled with black-coated men, talking in low, grave voices.

"You're coming, Miss Armitage?" Grace said.

Mary Armitage shook her head, her eyes were red and swollen, but her voice was calm. "No, I shall stay here, Mrs. Masters. Thank you all the same. She liked to know that I was in the hotel when she was out. I want to see that everything is ready for you when you return. I said my 'Good-bye' to her early this morning."

The funeral procession, it seemed to stretch for miles! The service and the return to the *Royal Lion*. The luncheon, when old Lord Swathford whispered, "Grace, m' dear—this is very well done. My good old friend would have liked this. It's what we all expect from the *Royal Lion* and Elizabeth Forest."

Claudia Bower nodded. "That's so, she'd have hated to think her guests were fobbed off with a cold luncheon. She'd have resented knowing that anyone could say, 'Ah, the *Lion* will change from now on.' Don't let it change, Grace."

"I may not be here, Claudia. I don't know what Mama has decided."

"She decided long ago that—eventually—you were to come here."

Shaking hands, thanking people for their presence and their sympathy, noticing how everyone seemed to like Martin, and how his gravity never deteriorated into gloom. Watching old Tom Illing slip back for a last glass of the '75, and feeling suddenly amused, wanting to laugh and wishing that she could have told Ivor about the incident. Ivor whose grave she had visited in France every year for the last six years!

The family gathering in the sitting-room upstairs, and Amos Swan, accompanied by young Vane, rustling papers. Percy leaning back in his chair, tired and worn out, Martin speaking in a low voice to Gladys, Eleanor swathed in veils and elegant black, she was leaning towards Edith confiding to her all that the doctor had said about her wrecked nerves. Edith was looking suitably interested. James had a pencil and notebook. He was seated at the round table, where Mama always had the tea tray placed.

Amos, his glasses perched on his thin nose, cleared his throat.

"And now—er—if we are all assembled—yes?"

Martin said, "Hello, where's Miss Armitage? She ought to be here."

James looked up, frowning. "Is that necessary, Uncle Martin?"

Percy said, "Of course it's necessary! Go and fetch her, will you, Walter?"

She came, Martin smiled at her across the room, Percy murmured, "That's right. Couldn't get on without you, Miss Armitage."

Explanations from young Vane, Amos nodding his assent and agreement. Transfers of stock. Shareholders who had died, or had sold their stock "for as you are all aware Mrs. Forest always kept the control in her own hands. On the death of a shareholder the relatives were always invited to sell the stock. Mrs. Forest always bought whatever they held." The Royal Lion was to go to Grace absolutely. "To dispose of, or bequeath as she wishes." Gladys was to have The Ring of Bells, this to pass to her children on her death. James was to manage the Majestic at Sunchester, with a generous salary, and a percentage of the yearly profits.

"I might say here," Amos interjected, "that the Majestic, the Callingly and the Scarlet Cross are the only hotels left as the combine known as the Forest Hotels. The rest belonged entirely to my late client."

Young Vane continued to read, "To my dear friend, Mary Armitage, the sum of ten thousand pounds, and the recommendation that she shall remain at the Royal Lion, as book-keeper and receptionist, so long as her health will permit."

Martin, glancing first towards Percy, who nodded, said, "We're all very very glad. We all hope that you'll stay at the Lion. It wouldn't be the same place without you."

Percy added, "And my brother never spoke truer words."

Mary Armitage gave a startled glance round the room, then stammered, "If you'll all excuse me—I should like to go to my room for a little. I shall be on duty at six, of course."

The door closed, Eleanor said, "Dear Miss Armitage. I *am* glad."

Other legacies, money and shares divided among Martin, Percy and Grace. Young Vane, half smiling as he read, "My dear daughter Eleanor will realise that in leaving no money to her I am doing right. She is a rich woman, with no encumbrances. I leave her such jewellery as I possess, and the Queen Anne tea service."

Smaller gifts to managers, old friends, to Amos Swan and Wilfred Thirk.

Percy said, "I suppose the company will wish me to continue to audit the books, Mr. Swan?"

"Indubitably, Percy, indubitably. We can't lose you!"

James closing his notebook, and slipping it into his pocket. "Mr. Swan, what will the legacies to my uncles and my mother amount to?"

"A considerable sum, James—a considerable sum."

"What is the amount?"

"That," answered old Swan smoothly, "I cannot possibly tell you—or anyone, at the moment. These things take time, James."

"My sister Gladys gets the Ring of Bells—I'm fobbed off with the management of the Majestic, at a salary!"

"But what a princely salary," Swan said, "and a percentage."

"I consider it most unfair! I suppose that it is because I called my youngest son after my poor father!"

"That, of course, I could not say."

Grace sighed as she remembered. "It's been a long day," she said.

Martin said, "Yes—very long, and some parts of it—very unhappy."

"Yes—notably my son's behaviour."

"Poor James. Losing his arm made him bitter, I think. Bitter and distrustful of everyone. Except himself! Still, he'll be all right at the Majestic. Living in that atmosphere"—Martin smiled—"may mellow him."

CHAPTER XXII

FRANCIS

FRANCIS FOREST said, "Hello, Miss Armitage, how are you? Is my grandmother in?"

Old Mary Armitage smiled and nodded. "Nice to see you, Mr. Francis. Yes, she's upstairs in Cavendish. She's expecting you."

He raced up the stairs and along the corridor, flinging open the door and rushing forward to fling his arms round Grace's neck.

"Oh, it's nice to be back here! I came down from the station with Uncle Walter; he and Auntie Gladys are coming in before dinner."

Grace rose and held the boy at arm's length.

"Let me look at you. You've grown. How are your father and mother?"

"Mother's all right, father is—absorbed as usual—in father!"

She tried to look shocked. "You shouldn't talk like that about your father, Francis. It's—undutiful."

The boy made an impatient movement, then ran his fingers through his thick fair hair as if puzzled.

"I don't know how it is, Gran—father and I never hit it off. I come back from school with all the good intentions in the world, I make splendid resolutions, and they all go up in smoke the minute I get home. He's pompous and he's critical."

Grace smiled. "Being critical isn't really a bad fault for a hotel keeper, my dear."

"It's his particular brand of criticism. It's all about things that don't matter, or else do matter frightfully to me, like—for instance—when I told him that I was president of the school debating society he said, 'And I don't doubt you regard yourself as a budding prime minister.' He kind of takes the gilt off the gingerbread."

"The gingerbread is still good to eat, without the gilt."

He laughed. "I know—only it doesn't look so nice, does it?"

Grace listening to him, watching him, thought how good it was to have him with her again. Perhaps the fact that James did not care for his eldest son was a blessing in disguise, for he was quite willing to allow Francis to come to Callingly for his holidays. Grace had come to a kind of unwritten agreement with her son. She had pointed out that she was a rich woman, had made no secret of the fact that Francis was very dear to her, adding that, provided she had some voice in his education and upbringing there was no reason why, at her death, Francis should not be excellently provided for.

James, growing more pedantic every year, said, "I take it that you intend to make Francis your heir, Mother."

"That was what I had in my mind."

"With certain conditions?"

"Scarcely conditions, James. I am very fond of Francis, he reminds me almost startlingly of your brother, and—frankly—he irritates you. Let him come to me for his holidays. I'm alone—except for visits from Gladys and her nice bairns."

James, she remembered, had considered the idea with gravity. He had grown rather stout, and he was undoubtedly pompous. A good fellow, a faithful husband and to George and Fredrick a kind, if strict, father. He was a good business man, and had a great sense of duty to the community. He was a councillor, next year he would be an Alderman, in a few years, Grace did not doubt, he would be Lord Mayor of Sunchester. He sat on a dozen committees, he was always to the fore in any new charity, he was reasonably generous. James was strictly "reasonable" in everything.

Now, after due consideration, he said: "I will admit that I find Francis less satisfactory than his brothers. Not that he does not work well at school, his masters, I believe, think highly of his ability. Whether it is the type of ability to make for commercial success, I cannot say. I imagine not. He has absorbed—from where I do not know—ideas which I consider positively dangerous. He was speaking the other day with positive admiration of MacDonald and his mob! He seems to imagine that the poor must be pampered at the expense of the rich. When trying to explain to him the other day that trade depressions, like those through which we are passing at the moment, were regrettable, but almost a necessary part of the

economic system, he replied that there must be something radically wrong with the system. He added that, of course, the rich were too rich and the poor too poor. That kind of nonsense, Mother, is annoying to a man of my calibre. From a boy of thirteen! Poof!”

Gently she had headed him back to the original subject.

“I am perfectly willing to be responsible for Francis’ education, and it shall be the best possible.”

For the first time, James looked less austere.

“Oh, you can’t better Hailstow,” he said. “Admittedly it’s expensive, but it is excellent, in every way. Naturally, I examined its claims to being a first-rate school very carefully, very carefully. I will admit that with George and Fredrick at school—and even preparatory schools are expensive—to have Francis provided for would be a great help. I shall think it over, Mother; I shall discuss it with Edith, and let you know my decision.”

He had written consenting to Francis coming to Callingly for his holidays, “except for a necessary and brief visit to his home and family,” and he accepted Grace’s offer to be responsible for the boy’s education.

Now, Grace watching him, young, tall and well grown for his age, full of vitality and interest in everything, felt that life had renewed itself for her. She realised that her own son, Francis, had always been more dear to her than James; knew too, that since Ivor Masters’ death her life had been empty, filled only with extraneous things. Those things had meant work, hard work, difficult work, but work which had never touched the intimate part of her life.

She thought, ‘I’m a very ordinary woman. A home, husband and children would have filled my life completely. I never imagined that I should develop into a hotel keeper—and a successful one at that. At the outset I wanted Fred and Fred’s children, Fred’s comfort and content. I lost that. I began again to make my children the centre of my world. Francis was killed. Gladys married—and happily, she has her own children, her husband, she is devoted to them all. James—well, James developed in a way I had never foreseen. He isn’t like his father, he’s straight and decent, good living, temperate, he’s all that seems to make for good citizenship. But—he doesn’t like me very much, he’s always disapproved of me since I married Ivor. Then—when I realised that my children had their own lives to live, independent of mine, I found Ivor—and I lost

him. Now, I'm nearly sixty. I don't look it, I don't feel it, but I *am* growing old. Old age almost always brings loneliness. Mama was lonely, for all her success. I shall be. I want someone for whom I can work. In whom I can have supreme interest. I've worked to get Francis—and oh, how thankful I am that my work has been successful.'

She had never been an intellectual woman, she had read comparatively little, and apart from the Suffrage, her knowledge of political matters had been and still was slight. She voted for the Socialists because she believed that they were progressive. Grace liked progress. She hated dirt, insanitary houses; it distressed her that children born of poor parents should have restricted opportunities. She hated war and she believed that the Socialists had a policy which meant peace for the whole world. She heard men in the Small Smoking Room discuss the present depression, and felt—always—that there must be some remedy, and that it should and could be found by men who were sufficiently single-minded and lacked axes which they wished to grind. She knew that even in Callingly, a small town, and a town which had always boasted of its prosperity, there were homes where appalling pinching and scraping went on in order that children, men and women, might live at all, while preserving some of the decencies of life.

Francis Forest, in spite of his youth, and in addition to the love which she had for him, seemed to bring light into the dark places of her mind. He was young, vital, eager. He believed that if wrongs existed they existed only so that men of goodwill might change them to what was right and just. Francis had no inhibitions. He belonged to a new generation which voiced its opinions, even if those opinions might be contrary to convention.

Not that he was entirely absorbed in political and economic problems. He was interested, it seemed to Grace, in everything. She remembered his excitement over the first "talkie."

"Gran, it's marvellous. A film with talking! Al Jolson, an American. Oh, admittedly it's sob stuff. *The Singing Fool*." She remembered that he had sung "Sonnie Boy" to her, and laughed, saying, "That's complete slop, but—well, there is something about it that gets you! And think of the future of the 'Talking films'—it's unlimited."

Grace said to Miss Armitage, "He makes me feel young again. He's so full of life and interest. He seems to know so much more than boys did when I was young."

Miss Armitage replied, "Ah, education has advanced, Mrs. Masters. And Mr. Francis is most intelligent—everyone says so."

There were so many things over which Francis grew excited. He had been excited over a new star—Francis said that she wasn't new, merely that she had never had the recognition which was her due.

"Gracie Fields," he said; "oh, Gran, wonderful, marvellous. No, I don't know if she's pretty—she's terribly attractive. She's sincere. I know that. I've heard of Marie Lloyd. Did you ever see her? People tell me that Gracie—oh, everyone calls her that—is something like Marie Lloyd. Perhaps it's the same quality of sincerity that they both have—I mean have and had."

He could talk of nothing else when Amy Johnson flew to Australia.

"Think of it. A girl—she's only a girl really. Embarking on that adventure. It's the same spirit that inspired Raleigh and Drake, Cabot and Franklin, Shackleton and Scott. I don't believe that she's done it for notoriety. It's something deeper. Like Cobham and Seagrave and Malcolm Campbell—it's not just big money prizes that makes them take these risks. It's"—and suddenly Francis would grow confused and flush to the roots of his fair hair—"it's—doing something that's worth doing."

He was tempestuous, he was for ever filled with enthusiasm for something or someone, or else full of anger that something unworthy or unjust had transpired. There was nothing serene about Francis. At school he worked hard, his reports were always admirable, and though his successes in sports were never spectacular, they were sufficient to prevent him from being ranked as a failure.

For Grace Masters the years had never passed so quickly. Sitting in Cavendish she thought of that so often. When she was a child a year—birthday to birthday, Christmas Day to Christmas Day—had been eternities. A whole year—twelve months had seemed a limitless stretch of time. Now, Francis went back to school, and—so it seemed—in a flash he was back with her again. The New Year, Easter, Whitsuntide, Midsummer and—before you knew where you were, Christmas and New Year were there again. These festivals, she knew, all meant the return of Francis to the Royal Lion. She had centred her life in him, he was the reason for her work, her activities, he was her real interest in life.

James had become almost a stranger to her. From time to time she visited him at Sunchestei, and at long intervals he drove over to Callingly to see her. He arrived in an immense car, with his pretty tight-lipped wife, and Grace always felt that he looked on the Royal Lion with a tolerant and slightly condescending eye. She felt that in his heart he regarded her work as "playing at hotel keeping." He had no interest in the smaller houses, which were in her hands and those of Percy entirely. His whole being was centred in the Majestic and its ever-increasing luxury.

His conversation dwelt on the Majestic. He had long stories of visiting Americans who had declared that the Waldorf could offer nothing better, of notable personages who had sent for him and lavished compliments upon him, he was full of his civic honours, of his multitude of committees and boards. Grace listened, watching him, thought, 'He's so good, so upright, and such a bore.'

Gladys, full of her work, her three charming children, had thoughts only for them and the Ring of Bells. Grace loved the children, liked to hear of the successful business, but she could have wished that Gladys and Walter might have shown interest in something outside their immediate circle of interests.

Gladys, growing stout, like her Aunt Eleanor, smiled a little pensively, when she said, "I suppose, Mother, that I shall have to manage to attend the Mayor's reception, but really the moment my back is turned something or someone needs attention. Really servants in these days are a dreadful trial. I am sure we pay good wages, they have plenty of free time and yet—they never seem really satisfied. Oh, dear—how times have changed, Mother dear."

Yet, Grace thought, Gladys enjoyed her difficulties, and found a certain satisfaction in repeating that she could not possibly go here or go there, smiling and adding, "I'm a business woman, you see."

Good—of course they were good. They were honest and decent, they were scrupulous and kindly, but they got so little joy out of life. Joy at least as Grace knew it. They took everything so seriously. They were immersed in their work, they felt that their hotels were the centres of the universe. James could not visualise England if England lacked the luxury of the Majestic, and Gladys felt that the Ring of Bells was the very heart of Yorkshire.

She smiled, as she thought, 'And yet the Royal Lion is still more individual than either the Ring of Bells or the Majestic,' then laughed at herself for falling into the same error as her children.

"Francis," she told Martin, "is my salvation. He makes me forget that I keep a hotel, forces me to go over to Leeds to the theatre, drives me over to Harrogate to hear music, and refuses to allow me to stay here all day and every day."

Martin said, "I believe, Grace, that you're happier than you've ever been."

"Ever been——" she repeated slowly, then added, "Perhaps you're right, Martin. Spring for me came just a little too late. I loved Ivor, no one knows how much, how deeply, but—now—looking back, I wonder sometimes if that first happiness would or could have lasted."

"If it had not lasted," he said, "it would have been through the force of circumstances, not through any fault of yours or his."

"But you agree——?"

"That it might have—ended less well than it began? Yes," thoughtfully, "I think I do. I believe that good hotel keepers are married to their hotels, Grace. I've watched, and I think that I know that."

Martin came often to the Royal Lion. He rarely stayed for more than one night, and always came with a secretary and numerous boxes and despatch cases. Martin was always preaching here or there, addressing meetings or conferences, meeting important people, and when he was doing none of these things, dictating letters at tremendous speed or working on his own manuscripts.

He had grown stout and rather heavy. A fine figure of a man, many people thought him handsome, but Grace regretted his one-time look of youthful alertness. Regretfully she felt that Martin had grown conscious of his power, and his importance. Not that she doubted for a moment that he was sincere, that he worked harder than most men, and that his whole heart was in the work which he did; but there was a feeling that Martin had once been a bright mirror, and that at forty-nine that mirror had been clouded, the quicksilver had grown less bright, like those looking glasses which she had found in some of the bedrooms of the Royal Lion. She had said to Mrs. Laverick, the housekeeper, "Send these to be re-silvered." Listening to

Martin's beautiful, smooth and perfectly produced voice she felt, suddenly, "I wish Martin could be—re-silvered."

Thinking of all these things she felt the weight of all that she, Percy and indirectly Martin, carried. Percy at fifty-four had grown thin and sallow, his face seemed to have shrunk, he stooped a good deal and was apt to grow querulous over trifles.

"You're working too hard," Grace said to him.

Percy frowned. "Nonsense! You'd like to make an old man of me. Of course, I work hard, very hard—but the work is there to be done, and I suppose someone has to do it."

"Someone—but why you, and why me? I'm tired of racing round every week to visit the small hotels and keep them up to scratch."

Percy stared at her, reproachful and sad. "Ah—one can't avoid responsibilities merely because they are heavy, my dear."

"Then—shift them," she said.

"You mean—evade them," Percy amended.

"I mean nothing of the kind. Why don't we get rid of them?"

"Grace, don't talk such rubbish. How can we—get rid of the Forest Hotels? You're talking like a child."

Thinking of that conversation, she said to Martin, "Martin, are you interested in the Forest Hotels?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, then said, "No—I don't think so. Why——"

"Because I'm not young any longer, Percy begins—though he would never admit it—to find the continual round something of a trial, and you,—well, as you say, they're of no interest to you."

He smiled. "I may say that I find good use for the money they bring into my bank, Grace."

"I know, I know, but there would be money coming in if we turned them into a company and held shares. Which of course is what we're doing now, on paper. In reality, we—Percy and I—shoulder the responsibilities, and—I'm tired of it."

Martin nodded, slowly and thoughtfully. "Yes, I see what you mean. You've lived hard as regards work, Grace. I don't wonder that you're tired. It's an idea. I'll talk it over with Percy, and see how he feels. Yes, we might get rid of them." He shook his head. "We're far too rich, you know. You and Percy might both retire and live lives of complete ease."

"We've grown out of the habit," she said. "I've come to regard my work as something necessary to my bodily health, like eating and drinking."

"I know"—for a moment she fancied that his face was sad—"I know. We've become cluttered up with money. Even I have come to count on it. Oh, I don't spend it on myself, but all the same—it buys things. I might have been better to have remained a parish priest, Grace. Oh," quickly, "don't think that I'm such a fool as to underestimate my own value, and the value I am to the Church. I'm worth a good deal, and I don't mind admitting it. I work hard, I work harder than most people, but I don't think that it's very good for anyone to know that he can command packed churches, that his books sell by the thousand." He leant forward, his hands clasped between his knees, and for a moment she saw the old Martin. The Martin she had known and Ivor had admired. Out of the years which were past, she heard Ivor's voice saying that it would be nice to belong to Martin's Church, adding that perhaps Martin might allow him to "swing that censer thing."

"We've got into a queer kind of muddle," Martin was saying. "I believe that my father wanted to do something really worth doing, and so did my mother—God rest her sweet soul. They held that the running of hotels was a kind of national obligation. They wanted to remove the stigma which was attached to the name of 'publican.' I have often heard my mother say that she held herself as much responsible for the good running of the 'bars' as she was for the good running of the hotel itself. I know—because she told me so often—the belief which my father held. The public-house was the club of the working man, he had a right to find that club as comfortable, as well run, as decent as the man in a more exalted stratum of life had a right to find the Savage, the Reform, or the 'In and Out' well run.

"That was very good, Grace," Martin went on, "only, like so many good things, we have allowed this hotel keeping to grow out of all proportion. We are slaves to it." He stopped and laughed. "Not I, and possibly that makes it the more reprehensible. I have only sat, and watched and—accepted the money. But my mother, Percy, you—why should you be slaves to this business, which has grown out of hand? No, my dear—let James have the Majestic, keep the Royal Lion, and Gladys will continue to run the Ring of Bells successfully, and entirely honestly. For the rest, their only excuse was that they were run by the brains and energy of Elizabeth Forest. She has finished

with them." He rose and held out his hands to Grace. "Let's get rid of them. If they cannot hold their high standard, the standard which my mother set—then they must slip back into being what they were in their beginning—village public-houses. The hotel at Brighton——?"

She shook her head. "I have never even seen it."

"The place at Gloucester?"

"I have never seen that either."

Martin smiled. "There is the answer, I think. Once all the Forest Hotels were matters of personal interest to my mother. Under her wise management they grew and prospered. If her influence is still sufficiently strong, they will remain successful, well run, altogether excellent. If not—then they must find their own level. Grace," his voice was grave, and very kind, "what do you want from life?"

She held her head high, her eyes met his very steadily, "My life is over, Martin dear."

"No, no!" There was protest in his tone. "Only one part of it. You still have hopes and ambitions. Tell me, what are they?"

Grace made a little movement with her hands, as if she disclaimed the right to have either hopes or ambitions, then after a little pause she said, "Perhaps—Francis, Martin dear."

"Ah!" He threw back his head as if he had found satisfaction in her reply. "Francis. You want time to devote to him, to his development? You want leisure to spend with him, you want to guard his interests?"

Eagerly she answered, "Yes, I do. I'm wasting my energy in going here and there and everywhere. The Bay Mare, the Wheatsheaf, the Blue Anchor—they don't matter to me. I have this place, I want to make it live up to Mama's tradition, but most of all I want it to be a home for Francis when he comes back to Callingly."

"And what is Francis going to do?" Martin asked.

Grace thought for a moment, then said quietly, "He shall do whatever he wants to do. I won't force him into anything. Because this hotel is here, that is not to say that he will want to manage it. If he does, very well—we don't ask exorbitant prices at the Royal Lion, we don't trade in cheap stuff, we don't allow—irregularities. If he finds that this trade appeals to him, then we can be certain that he is taking over something which is good—clean—decent. If not—I won't attempt to coerce him. He shall—follow his star."

Martin straightened his shoulders; he sighed, Grace thought,

with a certain sudden relief. "Very well—I will talk to Percy to-night. I don't leave until eleven to-morrow. We might both have time to go and see Swan and young Vane. You're sure that you want the outlying houses to go?"

Grace nodded. "Yes—we've nursed them, made them what they are, now they must stand or fall on their merits."

CHAPTER XXIII

FRANCIS

THERE had been difficulties, Grace had expected them. James had come over and expostulated, he had talked of "the Forest Tradition" of the "monumental work which Elizabeth had accomplished." He had demanded if this work were to be—he said—"demolished." Grace had listened, Percy had interrupted from time to time with a few words, so blunt, so much to the point that they could only have been voiced by a Yorkshireman, and Martin had grown dignified and aloof. But, the outlying Forest Hotels had gone!

For the first time since 1894 the King's Head, the Lamb and Wheatsheaf, the Blue Anchor, the Grand and the Bay Mare were no longer under the direct control of the Forest family, with them had gone the hotels at Brighton and Gloucester. They had become a limited liability company, still retaining the name of the Forest Hotels. Little Carlo Bassinetti was general manager. He was the final court of appeal regarding anything which affected those houses. The shares had been almost fought for, the capital could have been subscribed ten times over, Percy told Grace. The public longed to invest its money in this concern. Martin, Grace, Gladys and her husband, Eleanor—though Eleanor had sufficient money already—James, and Percy had considerable holdings of shares. Only Percy was on the board. The rest of the Forests were merely ordinary shareholders.

Bassinetti, visiting Grace and Percy at the Royal Lion, was deeply moved. He was a short man, with immense dark eyes and a sensitive mouth. He looked as if poetry and music were his only interests, in reality he was astute, clever, and business-like. He was, in addition, completely loyal, and ready to work twenty hours in every twenty-four.

Percy said, "Sit down, Signor, have a glass of sherry."

Bassinetti bowed from the waist and said that nothing could make him more happy, and sat down.

Grace said, warmly, "I know that you're going to make a great success of this, Signor Bassinetti. Mrs. Forest always had such a high opinion of you and your ability."

Bassinetti breathed deeply. "Ah—Forest the old one," he sighed.

"'Ere was a lady wiss zee grr-eat mind and brr-ain. Now, when in moments of deeficultee I am faced wiz prob-lems, always I say, 'Now, Bassinetti, please to t'ink. T'ink 'ard. In zeese pos-it-ion w'at would 'ave been zee ac-tion of Signora Forr-est, zee old one?' She 'as died, but I believe zat 'er spireet vill 'ang around zees poor Carrlo Bassinetti, always rready to 'elp 'eem. Yes—zeese is my idea!"

Percy said, "Y'know, I don't think that's as silly as it sounds."

Bassinetti nodded vigorously. "No, no, not at all silee. She 'ave standards. No cheapness. Not'in unworthy. W'at zee Inglese call 'Fair does forr all.' Forr me," he smiled, showing his beautiful teeth, "eet is as if zee mantle of Elijah Forrest 'as fallen on zee poor leetle Elisha Bassinetti." He rose, and assumed an attitude, "Belieff me, Elisha Bassinetti veel year eet wiz honour."

"That's very well said, Signor," Percy assured him, his tone was hearty but he was obviously disturbed because the little man's eyes were suffused with tears, and the full lips trembled. He held out his hand and said, "Yes, that's right—fair do-es all round. That's the idea. Oh, we're not afraid that you'll let the old firm down, Bassinetti. Good luck."

Grace sat thinking long into the night. This was the great change. A venture which had been so personal, so individual had changed, and become merely an investment in which the public had faith. The old days were gone, the hotels no longer relied on the direction of one energetic, intelligent woman; they were machines which must grind out money, show their profits—or sink into obscurity. In the old days, how often had she heard Elizabeth say, "The Bay Mare isn't doing so well—never mind, it's certain to pick up. The Lamb and Wheatsheaf can carry the Bay Mare for a year if it's necessary. I've a great affection for the Bay Mare." Now that personal feeling had gone, each hotel must pull its weight, justify itself, show profits or—go. It was sound enough, Grace thought, but it was impersonal. She had driven round the country so often with Elizabeth, together they had walked through the narrow streets of old-

fashioned towns and stared into the windows of antique shops.

"Grace!" She could hear Elizabeth's voice now. "Look at the blue and white plate. It's the old Colonial pattern. Just the thing to finish off the shelf at the Blue Anchor! I'll get it," or "Look there, my dear, that ladder back chair. Exactly what I want for the smoking-room at the King's Head!"

She didn't mind the fact that the hotel at Gloucester had been sold, or that the Callingly at Brighton had been absorbed into a chain of hotels. They had never held any really personal interest for old Elizabeth. The rest—those comfortable, individual, country hotels which had meant so much to Elizabeth—they were what she regretted, even though she had felt so long that she was tired of managing them.

"I wonder if we ought to have let them go?" Grace said to Percy.

He answered, "What? Oh, why not? We've worked hard enough, time we had a little rest now. Mama would be the first to wish it."

"I still—wonder . . ."

"But I thought that you were the first person to speak to Martin about this business?" He smiled. "Aren't you certain of yourself, Grace?"

She did not answer for a moment, then said gravely, "I don't know that I'm certain of anything, Martin."

"Eh?" He looked up from his evening paper, startled. "What d'you mean?"

"I don't even know that," she said. "The world's a puzzling place, for me at least."

"Tut, tut!" His tone was tolerant, half amused. "You're growing into the habit of thinking too much, Gracie. Leave thinking to other folks."

II

When Francis came home for Christmas, Grace felt that he was the only person who understood. Martin might have done, but Martin was in America, on some extended tour, preaching, speaking, presiding at conferences. Francis had grown tall. He was nineteen and for a year had been at Lausanne, and then had come back to London to serve as a "comme" at the Savoy, later returning to Paris to be receptionist in the Maurice. He had gone from there to the Adelon at Berlin, where he had

been one of the "head waiters." He had been in control of eight tables, and his employers stated that he was excellent at his work.

Grace said, "And you talk German, Francis?"

He nodded. "Sufficiently. The Germans frighten me, Gran."

"The Germans! Francis, why should they frighten you?"

"I can't tell you. I went there anxious to be friendly. Oh, I did my work sufficiently well. I wanted to be friendly. To feel friendship for them, but—'Der Geist der stets verneint.' The spirit ever said, 'No.' The National Socialists"—he spoke more slowly—"they mean business."

"Business?" Grace asked. "What kind of business?"

He looked at her, his eyes moody. "Who knows? Bad business for us I believe."

"But this man—Hitler—he has said that he wants nothing which cannot be given to Germany easily. You know, Francis, I have a feeling that he is right in demanding that Germans shall have room to—to live. He swears that he, this man Hitler, has no wish for territory."

Francis nodded. "I know. He has sworn that, very often." He laughed, without, Grace felt, much mirth. "I have been in France too, my dear. 'Un menteur est toujours prodigue de serments.' And that means, Gran dear, that—people sometimes protest too much, and often with precious little truth in their protestations. Oh—what a business!" He jumped up and began to pace the room, talking as he did so. "What's wrong with the world? The world can give us, all of us, all we need. Food, clothing, warmth—and God knows there is sufficient room for us all. In England, at this moment men and women and children are starving! No work! But there should be work, if the system were not outdated, slow, clumsy and clogged with the dirt and dust of years. I told you that I was afraid of the Germans. I am. This man—and it's so easy to laugh at him and call him a 'house painter'—has a plan, and he's putting it into action. He's scrapping the old machinery, he's putting in up-to-date stuff. We may not like it—in installing it he's introducing many things which are horrible, abhorrent. Persecution, ruthlessness, dictatorship. He's sweeping away kindness, and tolerance, he's filling the country with an organised gang of spies—but he's making them—the Germans—believe that behind it all there is a great purpose, he's forcing them to believe that they are fighting to re-establish and fortify and purify the Fatherland. He's saying, 'Do this and this and this, and I will

show you results! That's what people want and long for—*results*. Something concrete. Not merely assurances that 'this is as it has always been, we have weathered many storms, and we shall weather this one. Prosperity will return.' They want to see the signs of the return. I hate dictators—hate dictatorships—but I can see why they get away with it. Results! Il Duce says, 'Yes, maybe you're poor now, but you're not as poverty stricken as you were before I took over.' He can point to this and the next thing, and say, 'I gave you these things.' The British are a very patient nation, but even patience wears thin, Gran dear."

She looked at him, her face wearing an expression of bewilderment.

"But, Francis, what does all this mean? You say that you're afraid of the Germans, yet you praise Hitler and Mussolini for what they have done."

He nodded. "What they have done," he said, "not what they will do."

"They may not do anything more," she said hesitatingly.

"They must. That's the penalty dictators pay for being dictators. They're like music-hall artistes—they must forever be thinking out new and startling tricks. One thing, be certain, they can't stand still. Now, at this moment Germany's arming."

"I thought that Ramsay MacDonald, and you've always admired him so much—was all against rearmament."

She was surprised at the bitterness in his voice. "Yes—and he was out at Seaham a month ago by a twenty thousand majority! Has he been right—yes, emphatically. Has he been wise? I don't know. We have the Scripture to assure us that the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light."

He would talk to her, and at the same time Grace felt that he was trying to come to some opinion of his own. She worried for him, he obviously felt these problems so deeply, he was puzzled and disturbed, there were times when she felt that he was actually unhappy.

In January, 1936, he stood beside her, listening to a voice which told the world that the life of George the Fifth was drawing to a close. Grace wiped her eyes, she felt Francis' hand on her shoulder.

"Peacefully drawing to a close," he said softly. "There's something very lovely about that—peacefully."

Grace said, "I feel that there is a personal loss in his death. We've all known him such a long time. I remember her when her hair was like bright gold. Sir Gervase always says that he was the finest shot in the world. Ah, poor man."

Together they listened to the first broadcast of the new king. A queer, oddly Cockney and yet sympathetic voice, saying, "Most of you know me as the Prince of Wales . . . but I am still that same man."

Francis said, "The new order, eh? The old order changeth, giving place to new, isn't that it?"

"And God fulfils Himself in many ways," Grace continued. He said, "In—many—ways. Shall we understand them?"

Mary Armitage, who was listening with them, said impulsively, "Oh, he's good, our new king. Every man and woman in England loves him."

Francis went back to London; he was working at the Carlton. This, he said, was the last job he intended to do as part of his training. He would come back to Callingly and talk matters over with her. The South Coast Hotels might find him a manager's place, until they came to some decision. This was the last of his "study jobs."

He returned in March. He said, "There, I've learnt all that mere study and work can teach me. I've got to try out what I know now, see if I can apply what I've learnt. First, can I take a little holiday?"

She was delighted. They had taken holidays before, and every day had been a joy to her.

Tentatively she asked, "Where do you want to go?" and knew that she longed almost passionately that he would answer as she hoped.

"Where do I want to go?" Francis laughed. "You old fox—surely it is where do you want to go!"

Gratified and happy, Grace said, "Pooh, you don't want to trail round with an old woman of nearly seventy!"

He said, "If you're nearly seventy, then I'm nearly twenty-four. You're sixty-five and I'm nineteen and we're going off to see things and go places. To motor through Germany, down to Italy, and come back by France. How will that suit you, Gran. It's going to cost money, because we're going to do it in style, so dig out your old stocking and see what you have hidden in it."

She was excited; she told everyone, "My grandson wants a holiday, and he has decided to take me abroad. Yes; Germany,

Italy and France. Very delightful it will be too. Of course, he speaks all the languages fluently."

Gladys said, "Now that *will* be nice, Mother. I often say to Walter that I wish we could travel. But"—she laughed—"how much time do we get? What with one thing and another, a fortnight at Scarborough is about all we can manage. And then either Walter or I have to come back once a week at least. What a life!"

Eleanor Benfold puffed and wheezed. "Very nice, Grace. My doctor wants me to go to Aix, for the cure. I don't think that I could stand the journey. I don't really."

Grace went over to Harrogate and bought new clothes, bought a special kind of trunk that was light and yet strong, bought a new thermos flask and a patent sandwich case. She was more excited than she had been for years.

Then, one night, Francis came into Cavendish and said, "The Germans have occupied the Rhineland. Well, we'll go out there while the going is still good."

Grace said, "I don't suppose it matters, do you? After all, the Rhineland belonged to them before the last war."

III

They began their holiday. To Grace every moment was enchanting. She was filled with pride when she heard Francis speaking German, when later he spoke Italian and still later, French. He had lost his air of depression and apprehension, he was gay, amusing and always very kind.

"You've never been abroad before, have you?" he asked.

"Only to—the graves in France." Her voice was very low.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I forgot. Forgive me, Gran."

"Sometimes I forget too," she said. "Not—my husband, but the fact that he is buried over there. I'm glad of it. I don't want to think of him as being—well, killed in the war."

"I wish that I'd known him."

"You would have found him very kind, and very, very stupid. Almost attractively stupid. He used fewer words than any man I have ever known; he swore dreadfully," she laughed, "yes, really dreadfully, until he saw that I hated it. I never saw him read a book."

Francis said, "What did he read?"

"Sometimes a morning paper, very often only the sporting

edition of the evening paper. He loved music-halls, and comedians in musical comedies."

"What else?"

"Marguerite de Valois—the grandmother of my dear Porthos."

"And——?"

"And me," she said simply.

Francis took one hand off the wheel and laid it on hers for a second.

"Dear Gran—he sounds marvellous."

"I think in his queer way that he was. He was honest and single-minded. He wasn't afraid of people and what they might say or think. He liked simple things and people, and yet his admiration for Martin was tremendous. Martin liked him too. He always talked about 'Martin's Church'—as if it belonged to Martin. He once told me that I was the tenth wonder of the world. He found it difficult to believe there were only seven. I suppose that all his life he had talked about the 'ten wonders of the world'."

Francis sighed. "Awful to think that it—ended."

"I never felt, never have felt that it did—end. After the very first shock it wasn't difficult to go on. No one, nothing could take from me what I'd had, you see."

"Oh, how I loathe war!" Francis exclaimed. "Didn't he hate war?"

"No, I think that he rather enjoyed it. He looked on it in an impersonal way. He never admitted that he hated individual Germans, that he felt that he wanted to kill any of them—as men, only as part of the machine which the Allies were trying to break down."

"Yes, but why let any machine get so out of hand? Oh, don't let's talk about it. Look at the sea down there. Was anything ever so blue, ever so lovely?"

His spirits seemed to sink as they neared England on the return journey. They stayed in London for three nights; Martin was back from America, and they dined with him in his rather elegant, and yet faintly austere house. He explained that he only occupied part of it, the rest was used by his two secretaries and another priest who was more or less an invalid.

He listened, his finger tips laid lightly together, to Francis speaking of the depression, heard his railing against a system which made such things possible, tolerantly and with interest.

"The whole system," Francis declared, "is too elaborate."

Martin nodded. "The machinery is old, clumsy."

"Then," eagerly, "break it, scrap it, install new machinery."

"The trouble is that so much of this machinery belongs to old people. Old people who say hopefully, 'It's worked very well for me, and even if it does break down now and again—well, it will last my time.' Old people are selfish as a rule, Francis."

"But the world should be for the young people—the people who are beginning life, not the people who are nearing the end. One day the world will be for the young people, Uncle Martin."

"Will it?" Martin asked, and Grace detected a note of sadness in his voice. "I don't know."

"Here's something ready to our hands," Francis went on, "these special areas, these places where men are growing up who have never been able to work in their lives! Men who have always had to face the dole, idleness and boredom. The Church is rich, your Church, and the Church of England. These Churches don't *need* all their money and property. Can't their revenues be taken, used, put to some constructive work? It seems so obvious."

Again Grace watched a smile touch the corners of Martin's fine lips, yet when he spoke she heard again sadness in his voice.

"Young Democracy speaks," he said, softly. "And if the revenues of the Churches were taken—would that find a remedy for unemployment? Surely that would be merely applying plasters. This thing won't be cured by plasters, my boy, it needs the surgeon's knife. We don't care for economic and political surgery, you know."

"Better the surgeon's knife," Francis said with some heat, "than a sore which may turn to gangrene!"

"There we agree—perhaps we lack any very skilful surgeons, Francis."

"Isn't anyone prepared to do anything?" Francis demanded.

"A great many men would willingly give their lives to find a solution," Martin said. "Men are working day and night. To find the answer to these problems would be to make peace on earth."

"But who will find it?"

Martin said softly, "You know the answer—'men of good will.' As yet either their will has not been sufficiently strong or sufficiently good. The good will must be a universal effort. If we could count on an effort as strong as the effort nations make when they embark on war—then we might find peace."

"War—always we come back to the possibility of war," Francis said. "How can we contemplate it calmly?"

Grace spoke with sudden irritation, "Oh, why must we talk about wars? Martin and I have been through one—no, two. Surely we can't be expected to face another! Who wants war? No one. No sane person."

"Ah, no sane person," Martin agreed.

CHAPTER XXIV

FRANCIS

FRANCIS said, "Queer, everything seems to be growing so ugly!"

Grace protested, "My dear, how can you say that! It's been such a happy year for me, with you here, helping me, advising me."

He smiled, then grew serious again. "People—oh, not people like you and me, Gran—are at loggerheads. People who control destinies should be working together. One hears things, most of it gossip, I don't doubt, but—unpleasant gossip. Baldwin says this, the King says something else, the Bishops take sides."

"Oh, you mean this story about . . ." She broke off, for all her independence she still found it difficult to discuss scandal with anyone. Her father had quoted so often, "Speak no scandal, no, nor listen to it." She had spoken sharply to two of the chambermaids who had been gossiping on the landing that morning. They had not heard her approaching. Grace had seen their heads nodding, caught phrases such as "And they do say as she—" and "Mr. Millet was saying the other morning as he won't be able to—" She had felt her own cheeks flush, and heard her voice sharp with disapproval when she spoke.

"Kindly get on with your own work, and never let me hear this cheap and wicked gossip in my house. I'm ashamed of you!"

On November the twenty-seventh Francis said, "There's to be a Cabinet meeting to-morrow."

"What—about—all this?" Even then she could not bring herself to drag in names, names which were sacred to her.

He nodded. "Yes—the thumbs will be turned down."

"Oh, my dear, how sad it all is."

Then Grace felt that events moved more quickly than she could follow, she was bewildered and rather frightened. On December the tenth Miss Armitage stopped her as she walked through the hall.

"Oh, Mrs. Masters—some of the staff wanted to know if they might listen in this evening."

Grace answered, gravely, "Please tell them from me, Miss Armitage, that I wish them all to listen, and to listen with respectful attention. I want no comments in the public rooms, if you please. Respect and attention must be given."

"Certainly, Mrs. Masters."

She listened, with Francis and Percy, with Martin who was home from America looking thinner and tired out. She wiped her eyes from time to time, and Francis, standing at her side, laid his hand on her shoulder. When the voice with its queer accent ended with that rather desperate, "God save the King!" Grace burst into tears.

Francis turned to Martin. "Does that remind you of anything, Uncle?"

"I don't know, Francis. Tell me."

"God save the King, although he be not me,

And yet God save him if Heaven do think him me!"

"Yes—only it's not quite the same. He says that he has laid down his burden—he has renounced his kingship. Well, God help the man who has to carry it in his place. He'll need help."

Percy added, heavily, "Aye, and God help that chap who has just spoken. He'll need help and all."

In May, Francis wanted her to go to London to see the Coronation. She refused, there was too much to be done at the Royal Lion. He could go if he wished, she would rather stay at home. She had planned a very full programme. She had talked to Percy, to Francis, she had written to Martin. She wanted to make Coronation Day one which the children in particular should always remember. She had thought of everything—she had provided for either fine or wet weather. Francis told her that he had never realized her powers as an organiser until then.

"It's my swan song," Grace said. "I'm sixty-six, and if this is the last big thing I do, the last big festival I see—then I want it to prove that I've not been wasting my time all these years. There's the children's gathering at ten, with china mugs and new pennies, buns and fruit; that's after they've been to church at nine. They're certain to be late getting out, so that gives us ample time to get ready. There's the big service at eleven, and luncheon—the one that I'm giving—here at one. The procession at three, and then the Earl's dinner here at night. My, it will be a day!"

That night, she "talked it over." That was always the most pleasant part of any day, the sitting quietly in Cavendish going over all the events of the day with Francis and Percy.

"I feel when I talk it all over with you two," Grace said, "that I get the full flavour of it somehow. It's like when you look back on things. Do pinks ever smell as sweet as they seem to when we remember them twenty or thirty years ago? Or violets, or those big over-blown roses?"

"It's the same with money," Percy agreed. "I've never handled money that felt as nice as that I earned first. That was money!"

Francis grumbled, half laughingly, "Oh, you people who will look back all the time! It's Coronation Day, we've got a new king, we're starting off on a new era. Look forward!"

"Aye—look forward," Percy repeated, "with Hitler and Mussolini and all the rest on 'em! The Earl said to me to-night, he said, 'Forest, England's been taking it rare and easy. What with Prime Ministers who talked philosophy, and read Greek, and others who didn't read anything, what with Bishops expressing their opinions in matters which don't concern them—there'll have to be a strong line taken somewhere.' He said, 'Let people know their limitations. I've always known mine! The majority of the House of Lords has. Gilbert said, 'And while the House of Peers . . .' I forget the next bit, but he went on, 'And noble statesmen do not itch to interfere in matters which they do not understand.' It went on that England would remain as grand as ever. He repeated, 'Let people know their limitations!' I laughed. I said, 'What about this Hitler, m' lord?' He said, 'Forest, if he doesn't know 'em, we shall have to teach him!' Significant, that, eh?"

Francis walked restlessly up and down the room. "Meanwhile—what about cleaning up our own doorstep, Uncle?"

"Meaning?"

"Unemployment for one thing."

Percy rose, knocked out his pipe, and yawned. "My lad, there's always been unemployment, there always will be. It's inevitable. The unemployed are—always will be—the first recruits when we've got a war on."

"And until there is a war?" Francis demanded heatedly. "What then?"

"Nay, don't argue, my boy. They get the dole, and I'm sure that everyone's very good to them, reliefs and committees and so forth. No one wants them to starve—we're a kindly race. There,

I'm for bed. It's been a long day, and I'm fairly done. Good night, Grace, m' dear, you've done wonders to-day."

The year slipped past. People talked of the new king, they admitted, many of them a little grudgingly at first, that he was "doing his job, doing it well." People praised the Queen, her looks, her smile, "and during the Coronation," women told each other, "I believe that she never took her eyes off him. That's nice to hear, shows affection, and interest."

James, coming over in his immense car, asked trenchant questions as to how Francis progressed. Grace was tempted to say all that was in her heart regarding him; longed to tell James that there never was a better fellow, to recount his kindnesses and thoughtfulness, his popularity with everyone, his intelligence, and interest in everything. Watching her son's rather pinched face, with the tight-lipped mouth she, restrained herself. She knew that she was fearful that James might use pressure to take Francis away from her. For a moment she felt fear. He was all she had, and she couldn't let him go.

She answered, "Francis will make a very good manager. He's quite clever, hard working, and—from what I hear—he's popular with the staff."

"I wondered if you could spare him to me for a short time. Edith and I need a holiday. This Coronation year has meant immense work, in a place like the Majestic. Even here," tolerantly, "I suppose, Mother, you found yourselves additionally busy."

She nodded. "Yes, we've been quite busy."

"Edith and I are worn out. I propose, if you could spare Francis to me for a short time, to make a little tour over Europe. We should take the car, and"—he smiled his frosty smile—"our ease. I have always believed in some member of the family being in the hotel. George, though he shows considerable aptitude for the business, is—as you know—barely eighteen. I imagine that you could spare Francis to us, eh, Mother?"

Francis, it was clear, had no wish to go. He became faintly sulky and obstinate. He asked why Bassinetti couldn't come for the month, he hinted that his father might not enjoy the holiday much, adding darkly that "some queer things were afoot." His hints made Grace smile, Francis was so young, after all. He liked to demonstrate his knowledge, and imply that he was "in the know." James merely eyed him coldly, saying, "Tut, tut, Francis, don't grow into a rumour monger!"

Finally it was agreed that Francis should go to the Majestic

for a month. Immediately after the promise was given, Grace regretted it. James began to give instructions and warnings. Francis was only the figure-head; true he would have authority, but if he were wise he would be guided by what the heads of departments told him. He must make no changes, "in short," his father said, again smiling coldly, "you will be a strictly constitutional monarch." He would find all the necessary information in a book with a red cover, stamped with the word "Private" in gold letters. This was to be found in the small safe in James' office. "Please do not disturb any of the other papers and—er—contents."

After James left, Francis said to his grandmother, "I can't imagine why I said that I'd go, or why you let me. I shall hate it, it's not the kind of work I like. I loathe walking about in a black coat and striped trousers, with a grey tie and shiny boots."

"You're going," Grace said calmly, "because your father wants and needs a holiday, and you're glad to be able to do him a kindness, a favour. Don't behave like a spoilt child, my dear."

She was lonely without him. She missed his companionship, his help. She felt old and curiously deserted. He wrote long letters which were often amusing, and almost as often bitter and angry.

"We don't know what real distress is in Callingly," he wrote. "You need a huge, ugly town like this to get the full bitter flavour." "How we strain at gnats and swallow camels," another letter ran, "we talk of the possibility of a war, and even at this date we don't admit that it's bestial and wasteful, and utterly stupid. We rail against Mussolini for walking into Albania on Good Friday. Why? He's only running true to type and doing a rotten thing in the rottenest way. The fact that it was done on a Good Friday no doubt gave him a certain amount of cynical satisfaction. Anyway, what part does Christ play in modern warfare that leaders should keep the anniversary of His death?" He told her of Jewish refugees he had met in Sunchester. "Many highly intelligent. Nearly all with a look of having been stunned in their eyes. Some of them will talk, others refuse to even speak of what they have seen and suffered. I'm working hard and doing a lot of thinking. I'm not sure that thinking is ever very pleasant, at least not in 1938."

At the end of the month Grace went over to Sunchester to drive Francis home. The idea of going to the Majestic no longer dismayed her. All places were alike, if she might find Francis in them. She smiled at her own pleasure at seeing him again.

'I may be an old fool, but he makes me a very contented old fool!' she thought. 'I'm growing selfish, my own happiness matters so much to me.'

He was waiting in the immense entrance hall when she arrived. He came forward, smiling and holding out his hands. The light from the huge cut-glass chandeliers, which burnt day and night, shone down on his fair hair, and made his eyes extraordinarily bright.

"Oh, Gran, this is nice! I've just got to wait for my father, give an account of my stewardship and—go home."

With her arm through his, they were carried up in the handsome gilt lift to the private rooms. Grace thought, 'Now, I shall remember everything. The time when I lived here with Fred, the days when I met Ivor here, the good times and the horrible times.'

But she felt nothing except the pleasure of being with Francis again.

He said, "There you are—looks different, eh? My father is all for modernising everything. Here you have the perfect modern room! Light, comfort, utility, hygiene, everything except beauty of any kind. That is taboo—that belongs to an era which is over."

Grace looked and sighed. "I never liked these rooms, but I preferred them when they had some honest furniture, and were at least comfortable. I can't tell how one is supposed to sit in these chairs, they're all angles."

In five minutes Francis had forgotten all about the furniture, he was talking very quickly, telling her all that had happened. He had managed, he said, quite well, true there had been one or two difficult moments, but they had passed, and everyone had been very decent to him. No, he hadn't liked it. He could never like luxury hotels again. He grinned, 'The swimming bath is the best thing in the place—that's splendid!' Thanks, he told her, to her training, he had been able to prove that he knew quite a good deal about wine, about food, and even about cigars.

Someone interrupted his chatter, he called impatiently, "Come in."

A manager entered, he was rather breathless, his face was white.

"Mr. Forest—I'm sorry to disturb you but——"

"That's all right"—the impatience had gone—"you're not ill, I hope."

"No—no—the men are hunger marching. They've come from as far north as Carlisle. On their way to London. They've gathered in front of the hotel. Some of them have come in and sat down in the entrance hall. I don't know what steps to take."

"What do they want?" Francis said.

"They say that they want food. It's impossible. Shall I send for the police? Telephone to the Chief Constable, perhaps?"

"Telephone to no one. I'll come at once. I shan't be long, Gran."

He rushed out, and Grace asked the white-faced manager if the men were noisy or offensive.

"No—oh, no, they're just sitting there quietly, but they don't seem anxious to move. It's a dreadful situation, what will our clients think? I hope Mr. Forest won't lose his temper, get hurt in any way."

Grace rose. "Let us go and see what my grandson will do," she said.

At the head of the wide, low stairs, with their rich carpet, Grace stood and looked down at the scene in the entrance hall. Little groups of prosperous commercial men stood about whispering, one or two women with their husbands and friends talked and commented audibly. About twenty dusty, weary men sat on the wide leather-covered couches, their feet outstretched, their hands hanging between their knees. They were all shabby, all perfectly quiet, all gaunt.

She saw Francis walk towards one of them. Instinctively she compared Francis with the man to whom he was speaking. Francis so well groomed, Francis who that morning had bathed, taken his ample breakfast; Francis who lived well and slept comfortably.

She heard his voice, young, strong and very clear asking questions.

"How far have you come to-day? How many are there? What can I do for you?"

The man raised his head, and stared at Francis. She could not hear his reply, but she saw him raise his hand and point to a taller man who stood by the revolving doors. Francis nodded and walked over to him. She watched them talking, saw Francis nod, then smile. He said, "But of course—it shall be arranged immediately."

He turned, and looked round the hall, found one of his under managers and gave his order.

"There are a hundred of these men, they're tired and hungry. Get the small ballroom fixed up with trestle tables at once. I want plenty of tea, ham, bread and butter—cold beef—oh, you know the sort of meal hungry men want. Quick—I don't want them kept waiting."

"But, Mr. Forest!"

Francis smiled that engaging smile of his. "Be quick, there's a good fellow."

He was back to the leader of the Hunger Marchers. "That way—page show the way to the small ballroom. Plenty of seats round the walls. Plenty of food coming. I'll be with you all in a minute. I want to hear all about it."

As the last man passed him, Francis held out his hand, saying, "Give uz the lend of yer cap, buddy, will yer."

Then, holding the shabby cap in his hand, he came back to the foot of the stairs, and called up to his grandmother.

"Darling, have you any money? I want a lot. I know that you never stir without that bag of yours."

She took out two five pound notes, and held them out to him. Very lightly he ran up the stairs, offered the cap, and as she dropped the money into it, cried, "Thank yer, laady." Down again, and to every one of the guests he offered the cap, very few of them refused him, though one elderly man with a rich purple face shouted, "It's a damn disgrace, young man. Your father shall hear of this! It's encouraging the Bolshies. It's an insult to us to allow that gang of out-of-works in here. Hunger Marchers be damned for a tale. They have more money than most of us, and what's more don't have to work for it. Let me have a word with your father when he gets back, and by God, I don't enter here until I know that he is back."

His collection finished, he came back to the foot of the stairs, and held out his hand to Grace.

"Come and give them a North Country welcome," he said, and together they made their way to the ballroom.

The men were seated round the walls, waiters were hurriedly preparing the tables, others bringing in food, great urns of tea, plates and cutlery. Francis pressed Grace's arm.

"They'll enjoy this, won't they?"

He went to where the leader stood, she saw him laugh and hand over the cap and its contents, watched the elder man stare at the money, then stare at Francis. She heard them both laugh, Francis, she felt, laughed with pure pleasure, the other man with relief. The meal was ready, the men were seated, the

room was filled with the clatter of plates, the rattle of knives and forks, the clinking of cups and saucers. Francis walked up and down the tables, talking, passing up plates for more food standing for a moment to listen to some man's story, alternating between smiles and gravity.

Behind her a voice demanded coldly, "And what is this disgusting business, pray?"

She turned, and faced her son James. Behind him stood two of his superior staff, their faces anxious, the palms of their hands pressed together.

"This," she said calmly, "is a meal which I am giving to some Hunger Marchers. How are you, James?"

"*You* are giving! That's not the story I heard. What's this Sir Charles Bagstoke tells me, about Francis capering about making a collection from my guests? The mountebank! The impudent young Bolshie!"

"James, listen to me," she said. "Don't be a fool. Putting every other issue on one side, can't you see the value of this as an advertisement? It will be in every paper in England to-morrow. How much good will it do you if it is known that you took the side against giving hungry men food and drink? People may applaud you—but what sort of people will they be?"

"The sort of people, my dear mother, who use my hotel. Kindly remember that! The rest—don't matter to me."

The men had finished, they had risen, their leader was speaking to them, Grace could not hear his words. Slowly, giving Francis their thanks as they passed him, they filed out, quietly and orderly, through the kitchen entrance. As the last one disappeared Francis came over to where they stood.

His face was flushed, his hair ruffled, he still smiled.

"Hello, Father. Nice to know they're rested and that they've eaten. They wanted to cheer, but I asked them not to, because I didn't want other people to know what was going on. Oh, Gran, that chap—the leader, his name's Harry Hodgson. The men say that he's a grand fellow." He drew a long breath, "Oh—isn't it all a damned shame."

Speaking as if he bit the words off one by one, James said, "I heartily agree—a damned shame, a damned disgrace. Now kindly explain yourself, Francis."

Back in the modern room which she disliked so much, James paced up and down shouting his annoyance. She had never seen him so angry. His fury exhausted her, she felt old and very tired.

"James, might I interrupt your tirade to ask if I could have some tea. I'm very tired."

Without answering he strode to the house telephone and said, "Tea—at once. At once."

"Sir Charles—a most valued friend of mine—told me that he expostulated with you in the strongest terms. That you merely laughed—laughed at Sir Charles Bagstoke! And when I think what his influence can do——! Dragging in a crowd of sponging, and I don't doubt verminous loafers, the ball room will have to be disinfected. I cannot ask my guests to go in and breathe that atmosphere. The place positively stank when I came in. Explain yourself, Francis!"

Very white, robbed of all his enthusiasm, Francis answered:

"I don't think that any explanation is necessary, Father. The men were tired, they were hungry, and I asked them to have some food. They had no money, I asked people to give me some for them. That's all, and I think that's sufficient explanation."

"You hadn't the courage to tell them to clear out?"

Francis spoke very quietly, "No, Father, I hadn't!"

"You hadn't even the presence of mind to send for the porters and commissionaires."

"No, Father. It wasn't that I lacked presence of mind. I lacked the courage to do what seemed to me to be patently cruel, heartless and unjust."

"Cruel, heartless and unjust! My God, you talk like a local preacher. Don't you realise that those men will in all probability have taken all the table silver with them? Don't you realise that these agitating loafers are all Communists, that one day they'll turn on us and stab us in the back? Unless they're kept under."

"Don't you realise," Francis retorted, "that one day these men are going to be asked to save people like you, to fight for people like you and your fat Sir Charles Bagstoke. They won't be told that they're to fight for you—for him—for people like both of you, they'll be told that they are to fight for—*England*. Unless they're made to feel that England and—your sort of person has some regard, and even affection for them, why should they consent to fight? Under whatever régime that they had to live they couldn't be much worse off." His voice changed, it became cold and detached, "May I give an order?" He went to the telephone. "Give me the office. I want a bill for the tea given to the Hunger Marchers this afternoon—by my grand-

mother and myself. Yes, make it out to me. Be quick, please, I want to get away. Oh, yes, add the hire of the ballroom for the afternoon. Thank you."

The door opened, he said, "Ah, Gran dear, your tea."

James stared at his son, then turned to his mother.

"And you, Mother, are you going to provide meat teas for the Out-of-Works at the Royal Lion?"

Grace poured out her tea, and answered without raising her eyes.

"Why, yes, James, if they come to the Royal Lion. You see, I'm like Francis here. I don't only love England, I love the English folk. I like to know that England's name is as good as ever it was."

"No one has ever been able to deny the fact that I am a patriot," James said. "I have worked consistently for every good and just cause in this town. I shall continue to do so. To do what I feel to be my duty. This milk and water patriotism, this feeble, sentimental drivel is something which I—thank God—cannot understand. Mercy—yes, for all, but mercy which is tempered with justice. I took you for Communists, now I know that you are of that sickening brand of thought known as Christian Socialism. Pah—There must always be rich and poor, there always have been workers and drones, there are prizes for those who strive for them—that is justice."

Francis said, "Is it? By God, if I thought that I'd cut my throat. Gran, if you've finished let's go."

CHAPTER XXV

FRANCIS

HITLER and the Germans—no one talked of anything else. Carlo Bassinetti came over to see Grace, and spoke with tears in his eyes. "Signora, this mad Axis. 'Ow ees eet possible for us to be on the side of the Tedesci. 'Ow ees eet possible zat we can ever fight against England? 'Ave we no 'earts, 'ave we no memories? W'at was zee curse of Garibaldi, zees so grrreat man. 'Cursed be zee man 'oo fights against England!' Eef such a t'ings should effer 'appen, zee memory of zee curse shell rob our arms of strength, shell take all courage from our 'earts." His eyes were filled with tears. He had fought with the British on the Adiege in the Great War, he said, "And always I 'ave

'eadache. Always Eenglish nurse said, 'Ah, poor leetle Asperino!' So kind, so good. Zeere ees a rrest kemp for English soldiers not ver' farr frrom Verona. A leetle place, the Sirmio of Catullus. Paradiso! Zeer t'ey spik steel of zee Eenglish. Of officers, soldiers and povero Edvardo. No, Signora—eet veel pass. To-day, to-morrow—be patient!"

Clouds drew nearer, grew darker. Martin came over from Leeds, where he was preaching. He was very thin, there were dark shadows under his eyes, he spoke heavily but with some faint hope.

"I believe him to be—a man sent from God. If it is possible to save us—he will do it. If not, we are in God's hands."

Percy nodded. "Aye, I don't mind falling into God's hands, Martin, it would be falling into Hitler's I should dislike."

"If we do go to war," Grace asked, "are we—ready?"

Martin shook his head. "No—not even partially ready. Men have either been 'born out of due time,' or they have done the right thing in the wrong way."

That evening they waited. Martin had a headache, begged they might not have the wireless turned on, one of them could go downstairs to listen. He leant back in his chair, his eyes were closed, Percy, Francis and Bassinetti had gone downstairs to listen to the news. Grace thought that Martin looked so much older than his years. "He's only fifty-eight, and he looks over sixty. He's wearing himself out, poor Martin."

As if her thoughts had communicated themselves to him, he opened his heavy eyes, smiled and said, "Don't worry about me, Grace dear. I shall be all right in a minute. I've had a heavy day—and this anxiety——" His eyes closed again, and she fancied that he slept. There were steps on the stairs, people running, the faint echo of a cheer reached her. She rose and stood waiting, her hand pressed over her heart. Only one thought flashed through her mind.

'If it's war, Francis will have to go! God, don't let there be war.'

The door burst open, Carlo Bassinetti almost fell into the room with Francis at his heels.

"Signora, we arr saved. Cham-ber-lain veel fly—imagine this, 'e, the old man, veel fly to Monaco. Il Duce 'as left Roma for Monaco, also Daladier, and 'Itler. All veel be vell—ve shall steel live in peace. Ah, Dio, Dio gratzie."

She heard her breath coming in a great sob. "Oh, Signor Bassinetti, this is good news—the only news we wanted. But Monaco—that's in the South of France, isn't it?"

"Ah, Signora—no—yes eet ees, but zees place the Tedesci call Munchen—zee Eenglish call Munich, to Italiani is Monaco."

Martin said gently, "Indeed—a man sent from God. And like other men sent from God, he won't come through this without suffering."

They were reprieved, Grace thought that night, as she lay in the bed which had once been Elizabeth Forest's, with the portrait of the first James Forest, in his stiff frock coat, his robes, and his calm eyes looking down at her. Lying there, she thought how much he had seen, he had watched his own generation go, seen one to which she belonged take its place, the third generation had followed and here was the fourth ready to step forward. People hadn't altered, except superficially. They were kindly, cruel, greedy or self-sacrificing just as they had always been. There were improvements—the march of time had seen much that was bad swept away, much that was good put in its stead. Men had conquered the air, they could travel under the sea, they had harnessed the ether, they could speak to each other across the world. These things were, she supposed, steps forward, developments, improvements. Yet—so much time, thought, intelligence was directed towards destruction. Germany had re-armed, France had built her unbreakable Maginot Line, Italy was giving, so people assured her, even her children military training. Now, England had slipped back in the frantic race of rearmament. Only a few days before, Percy said—and she reflected he was a kindly man—that she ought to invest her money in munitions.

She felt that the whole world was insuring against a possible peace. Offering a guarantee to Fate, that come what might a war should sweep over the world at the earliest possible moment.

She thought, 'I'm old, I'm not interested in politics any longer. They interested me for one thing only—the Extension of the Franchise. I've never known poverty, want, I've never known what it was to go hungry—except when I was in prison. They say that Hitler provides the Germans with food, that Mussolini has improved Italy out of all knowledge; would it be very difficult for our young people to live under rulers who were—not English? If we did lay down our arms, refused to re-arm—would it be so very different? Might not some of our poor be better off?'

Thinking so she fell asleep, but remembering her thoughts when morning came, she talked of them to Francis. She ended with a phrase which she found comforting.

"It's only speculation, Francis, for we've got Hitler's promise that never again shall there be war between his country and ours."

"And that isn't the first promise he has made," Francis said.

"But he might keep this one."

"He *might*." He smiled at her. "Great-grandmama had a saying, 'Pigs might fly, but they're unlikely birds'."

"But you don't believe in war?"

"Me!" He laid down his knife and fork and stared at her. "Me believe in war! I loathe it, detest it. I can't find words bad enough to say what I do think about it. But I do believe in Freedom, and—although my brand of patriotism may seem to my father to be of the 'milk and water' brand—I believe in England."

"Oh, it's such a dreadful muddle," she sighed.

II

1938 slipped into 1939. People talked of nothing, Grace thought, except the probability and improbability of war. The constant reiteration shook her, she faced moments when she trembled with a definite fear which gripped her. Only Francis noticed it, and from then on, never was the wireless switched on in her room. Francis slipped away to the smoking-room to listen to the news. She said nothing, only knew that she was grateful.

Suddenly—everything was sudden in these days—nothing but the Poles and Poland were in everyone's mouth. Even Miss Armitage, no longer in the reception desk, but living in a small compact villa with an old servant who had been one of the under-cooks at the Royal Lion, came in talking of nothing else. She was very old, Grace thought she had changed in a few days from being an elderly but well-preserved woman to a very old one, even she tried to discuss Poland.

"Very pleasant to come into the dear old Royal Lion for a cup of tea," she said. "I miss the talk and the bustle. I can't say that I find private life very interesting after so many years in business. Ellen was speaking about Poland this morning. This Corridor"—she leant forward and spoke confidentially—"is it really a corridor, like the one here, or something more like that long railway tunnel before you get to Leeds, Mrs. Masters?"

"I don't imagine that it's like either, Miss Armitage. It's—well—it's a piece of land."

"Ah, really. Well, they tell me," she spoke as if the knowledgeable politicians had discussed it with her, "they tell me that if Hitler doesn't get it, he'll—*take it*."

"Oh, dear Miss Armitage, don't let us talk about war!"

"No, indeed." Then with determination, "I saw dear Gladys' children out walking yesterday. My word, little Ivor is going to be a handsome little fellow."

Grace sighed with relief and continued to talk of Gladys and her children.

She was leaving more and more of the work of the hotel to Francis, conscious that she was glad to sit in her own room, only coming down at long intervals or when she walked over to see Gladys at the Ring of Bells. Again and again she thought how good Francis was to her, and then quickly banished the thought which followed so automatically, 'what should I do without him?'

In April Martin died. He had been preaching at Newcastle, the priests told Grace that they felt he was tired, but that his sermon was as brilliant as ever. He had quoted the last words of the late Pope, "Pace, pace, Italia," and prayed that the wish of His Holiness might be fulfilled not only in Italy, but all through the world. When the service ended, he walked back to the vestry, and sat down saying, "Ah, I'm very tired. Give me a glass of water, please," then he sighed, and slipped sideways in his chair—dead.

She grieved at losing him, but unlike Percy her grief was not tempestuous, even Francis cried more than she did.

"A dear man," she said, "so kind, so good to me, he helped me through many difficult times. He was always busy and yet had time for my worries—always. He'll enjoy his rest, dear Martin."

"You did love him dearly, Gran, didn't you?" Francis questioned.

She laid her hand on his. "So much, my dear, so very much. But when you grow old it would never do to be frightened of death, to be dismayed about it. You'd grow frightened yourself, you see. We old people have seen it so often, perhaps we've grown used to it."

"Yet the thought of war frightens you," he persisted.

"Ah, that's because war means death to people who are not old. Death is natural, nearly always kind, war can never be either."

"I can't bear to think of you being frightened—ever." He said with a queer intensity, "Oh, Gran dear, I do love you so."

"Someone once told me that 'the end, we know, is the best of all,' you're the end, Francis, and—you're the best of all. You've made up for everything. Only," her eyes twinkled, "you've made me very selfish. I shall have to fight very hard not to dislike that young woman you'll bring along to see me one day."

"She doesn't exist!"

"She does exist," she argued gently, "only you haven't found her as yet. But you will one day—you must for your own sake."

III

He came into Cavendish one day, his face grave. He pulled up a chair and sat down near her.

"Gran dear, you've got to be very brave. To-morrow Mr. Chamberlain is going to speak to us all—everyone in England. For the first time for months you must listen to the wireless. It will save you the suspense of waiting until I could run upstairs and tell you what he says."

"It's—war, Francis?"

"I'm afraid that it will be war—unless a miracle happens."

"Miracles do happen, my dear."

"I hope, I pray that one will. Oh, Gran, I hate to think of your living through a war! And without me beside you."

"You'd go—at once?"

He nodded. She saw that his eyes were full of tears.

Her courage returned. "Now, now, my dear. We must hope—hard—all to-day, we must pray sincerely, and—well, something like Munich might happen again. We won't refer to it."

Francis had never seen her in such good spirits for months. She laughed, she demanded a glass of sherry before dinner.

"Sweet," she insisted; "that dreadful thing called a 'ladies' wine'—but I never had any real palate, I only pretended that I had!"

Later she sent for a bottle of cognac Napoléon, and poured it out for Francis and Percy herself.

"Yes, I shall join you. I want to sleep, and I hope that the Prime Minister will sleep as well as I shall." Then, Percy thought inconsequently, "Never be ungrateful. It's a horrid thing to be. Well," raising her glass, "here's to to-morrow. We want Faith, Hope and Love—that's the real charity."

Francis walked with her to her room, she kissed him 'Good night,' and repeated the warning which she had given to both he and Percy in Cavendish.

"Now, remember, I must be called in plenty of time to-morrow. I won't listen to the Prime Minister of England while wearing my dressing gown. It's—a great occasion and I want to—acknowledge it. Good night and God bless you."

She undressed, folded her clothes carefully as she had always done, said her prayers gravely but without emotion, got into bed and fell quietly asleep.

When Francis came to call her in the morning, because he was afraid that she might have lain awake thinking of that to-morrow which was now to-day, he found her lying very peacefully. She had escaped hearing the announcement that England was at war.

Francis stooped and kissed the cold forehead, whispering, "I'm so glad for you, Gran dear. It's here, and you'd have hated it."

London. 1941.

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